

EQUITY EXAMINED

HOW TO DESIGN SCHOOLS AND TEACHER
EDUCATION PROGRAMS WHERE EVERYONE THRIVES



AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY

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EDUCATION PROGRAMS WHERE EVERYONE THRIVES**



AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY

education that transforms lives

Equity Examined

How to Design Schools and Teacher Education Programs Where Everyone Thrives (first edition)

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AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY ANTI-BIAS, ANTIRACIST STATEMENT

The American Montessori Society is committed to interrogating ourselves and investigating our past practices, recognizing, addressing, and eradicating all current forms of racism and systemic oppression within our organization, and supporting our members in doing the same in their schools, programs, and practices. We recognize that an understanding of racism and bias varies across individuals, and engaging in transformational change requires courage, trust, empathy, and understanding.



AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY
education that transforms lives

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PART II: EQUITY AUDIT

INTRODUCTION

By Munir Shivji, Executive Director, American Montessori Society

IN 2018, the American Montessori Society Board of Directors voted to make Inclusion and Equity a strategic priority. We realized that speaking out against oppression and inequality when we saw it was not enough. Instead, we wanted to signal that our organization would be *actively* anti-racist, and that we would create tools, policies, and systems to support these efforts on a global level.

And while this work takes all of us, I'd like to first acknowledge the Black and Indigenous educators who have been doing diversity, equity, and inclusion and anti-bias, antiracist work in Montessori spaces long before DEI and ABAR were familiar acronyms. Thank you.

I also want to thank AMS board president, Dr. Amira Mogaji; former AMS board member Sandra Stevenson; AMS consultants Dr. Derrick Gay and Dr. Valaida Wise; and AMS director of equity and engagement, Maati Wafford. Your diligent expertise has challenged me and helped me grow as I evolve in my own personal journey, and I am deeply grateful for the ways in which you support equitable education in Montessori and beyond.

Finally, AMS owes deep gratitude to Wend Collective. Their generous funding support allowed us to quickly move our DEI initiatives forward in intentional and respectful ways.

Four years ago, the AMS board defined the Inclusion and Equity strategic priority with the following statement: *AMS will model and ensure the advancement of principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion by creating an environment in which all feel welcomed, respected, valued, and empowered.*

What do these words look like in practice? Well-intentioned organizations often slap inclusive messaging on social media accounts, and draft policies that sound good in theory but lack the concrete evidence of real work. We did not want to fall into this same trap. We knew we must recognize that we, the AMS board, were not the experts on diversity, equity, and inclusion. It takes all of us being willing to learn and unlearn, to grow and challenge, to question and liberate to be able to move forward in positive ways where all feel welcomed, honored, and appreciated in Montessori spaces.

When our team embarked on this journey, we had to start by asking ourselves a series of questions, including:

- How are our members feeling about this work?
- How are the staff, commissioners, board, volunteers, consultants, and other stakeholder groups feeling about this work?
- What is the current state of AMS's DEI and ABAR initiatives?
- How do our mission, vision, and values reflect ABAR practices?

- Is our nondiscrimination statement strong enough?
- What should be included in an anti-bias, antiracist statement?
- Are our hiring practices equitable?
- How can we show action beyond words?

As we grappled with these questions, we developed a structured plan to assess our culture, policies, and practices as an organization. Our team recognized that this work involves **all** of us, not just those who sit on a Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) Committee or those who are formal members of the DEI staff and consulting team. As such, we started conversations with the rest of our staff and board. We hosted DEI and ABAR trainings. We spoke to our community members and we listened to their stories, feedback, ideas, and concerns.

I am proud to say that through these efforts, AMS has:

- Released a comprehensive benchmarking tool (the audit you'll find in these pages) to assess diversity, equity, and inclusion for Montessori schools and teacher education programs
- Developed and adopted an AMS anti-bias, antiracist statement and revised our nondiscrimination statement
 - **AMS Anti-bias, Antiracist Statement:** The American Montessori Society is committed to interrogating ourselves and investigating our past practices, recognizing, addressing, and eradicating all current forms of racism and systemic oppression within our organization, and supporting our members in doing the same in their schools, programs, and practices. We recognize that an understanding of racism and bias varies across individuals, and engaging in transformational change requires courage, trust, empathy, and understanding.
 - **AMS Nondiscrimination Statement:** The American Montessori Society does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, culture, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, ancestry, national or ethnic origins, or any other legally protected status.
- Outlined a plan to further diversify the composition of the AMS Board of Directors, Teacher Education Action Commission, and School Accreditation Commission, in order to broaden perspective and understanding of the societal context in which AMS exists
- Determined systems and standards necessary for accountability for diversity, equity, and inclusion reporting
- Designed an ABAR Certificate Program for teacher educators, credentialed Montessori teachers, and school administrators
- Updated the AMS Handbook for Teacher Education Program Affiliation to require 12 hours of training on equitable classroom practices to support teacher educators and ensure future cohorts of adult learners have access to this learning in teaching their students in a more just way

Our work is just beginning. I am pleased to share that we are continuing to use rubrics, surveys, and focus groups to inform the directions and outcomes of this strategic priority. We are continuing to implement DEI systems and standards for teacher education programs, school accreditation teams, and annual reporting measures. And, of course, we are utilizing the Montessori Equity Audit you'll find in this publication to assess diversity, equity, and inclusion in our schools and teacher education programs.

In the pages that follow, you'll find personal essays from members of our AMS community that offer a variety of perspectives and worldviews while emphasizing the importance of anti-bias, antiracist education for all of us. We hope you'll discover something in these essays that resonates with you, or makes you see the world in a new way. After the essays, you'll find the audit, along with detailed instructions as to how to use it and share it within your school or teacher education program.

We invite you to share the content of this publication with your community (provided you include the copyright line on the cover on any reproductions, and that you not use the material for commercial purposes).

It is our hope that this book provides you the tools you need to denounce racism, intolerance, and exclusion while also disrupting bias and creating systems that evaluate processes and programming, allowing you to make decisions based on DEI best practices.

We know that Montessori education has the power to bring about positive change in the world. We see this in the natural evolution of our practice and the way this teaching philosophy transcends time. Concurrently, we recognize the need to adapt to the world in which we are living. While AMS's role is to protect and advocate for the highest professional standards that inform Montessori education as practiced in AMS-accredited schools and taught in AMS-recognized teacher education programs, it is crucial to recognize AMS is not a scripted curriculum. Instead, AMS is a public trust.

As your public trust and your professional membership organization, we sincerely hope that we will be able to collaborate as individuals and as communities to move forward the critical work of unpacking our prejudices and creating environments where all students, educators, and administrators can thrive. Thank you for being part of this lifelong work.

**PART I:
THE ESSAYS**



Identity and Exploration

STEREOTYPE AND THE SINGLE STORY

By Tatenda Blessing Muchiriri

BEING a Montessori African educator has been an odyssey. Coming from Africa, much of the rest of the world saw me as outside of civilization. Further, they could not grasp how I would have access to the European method of Montessori. I had to face others' misconceptions of who I was and am before I even began to grapple with the many layers of my own identity.

My adventure begins in 1985, just five years after the dismantling of Rhodesian apartheid. As a black African boy from a working-class family, my first years of education were largely untouched by the early childhood curriculum. Rather than attending preschool, I spent time outside with everyone in my community. My formative years were a pastiche of episodes that alternated between town and rural country life. My mother loomed large in my development, along with my five brothers and a complement of extended family. I remember it as the best of times, though many would quickly point out the resource disparity that would continue to plague my upbringing in the new Zimbabwe—between blacks and whites, middle- and working-class people, and rural and urban dwellers. Nonetheless, I made it to the University of Zimbabwe, where I studied Theater Arts.

Fast forward a few years: I was living in Asia and teaching Montessori. My identity and “diverse” background were constantly chafed by the ignorance of a community that was only just “discovering Africans.” People were barely equipped to deal with the fact that I was African, let alone a Montessori educator. I never knew that an arrogant question tinged with a “National Geographic filter” could cut so deep, and make me confront my faith in humanity. Many people who'd worked hard to build their careers as Montessorians would subtly express doubt that I had also made a similar valid effort. They couldn't conceive that a respectable working-class existence in Zimbabwe could produce an individual with just as much capacity or capability as their education had. The one upshot of my time in Asia was the support of my family and friends—and meeting Yuchen, who would become my husband.

The Chinese crucible was just a start. After moving to the United States, I was disappointed to find myself facing similar perceptions and biases. I settled in Colorado, where the community's generosity came tinged with subtle shades of prejudice, which made me doubt my decade-long experience as an educator. The eagerness to rope me in to fill diversity quotas in mostly-white educational spaces only brought me an awareness of the all-too-familiar disparities between the different sides of town. I found it especially jarring because the wrong side of the tracks—where people who looked like me lived—was only one freeway over, but an entire world away.

My ultimate takeaway from all this is that no matter where I am, some people will always hold unconscious bias, and will misunderstand me. I realized that I can only truly change the world by educating the child. Slowly,

I found my footing and became the change I wanted to see in my new home. I began tinkering with interventions to bring awareness to Montessori education and make it equitable to BIPOC communities, and especially African immigrants like me. I founded Montessori on Wheels, an enrichment program that uses a Montessori and Southern African indigenous pedagogical lens (including cross-cultural stories that children hear and create) to nurture the social-emotional development and intellectual growth of children from the BIPOC community. I feel that my charges are lucky to have my experience as an educator on three continents.

The back end of education—where administration, policy, and biases intersect—often reflects values increasingly out of touch with the future. I have done great personal work to ensure that I bring none of my prejudices to the classroom. Building culturally prepared environments in our schools and creating equity-conscious school cultures are critical, as is co-designing space in a way that invites and welcomes children, families, and community members and celebrates everyone’s backgrounds, languages, and culture. In the years to come, as economies integrate, the cost of travel decreases, and the gap between the developed and developing world narrows, I hope that my global, cross-cultural experience will be seen as more valuable.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Maria Montessori began her work with children that other people thought were less than, or deficient, but whom she took time to observe, value, and learn from. How can we use that approach in our conversations and interaction with people who look or sound different from us? How can we take the learning path instead of the judging path?

In a TED Talk, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie discusses the danger of having only one perspective and internalizing stereotypes. Power ultimately lies with the person or the culture or the organization that presents the lesson and gets to tell the story.

How have you or could you reject single stories in your professional practice?

BEING UNAFRAID

By Jessica Honer

I am a white, femme, Queer person who uses she/her pronouns. I wouldn't mind going gender neutral, but my self-expression doesn't hinge on it. I have found over the years that my identity is fluid. What once was "bisexual" for me became "gay" which then became "lesbian" (which I immediately rejected!), then "gay" again, then "pansexual", then back to "bisexual" and now I have happily and committedly landed on capital-Q "Queer"—for now. I grew up in a time when the adults around me only knew the words "gay" and "lesbian" and defined them as being attracted to the same sex, period. It took the work of many feminists, especially Audre Lorde and the late and beloved bell hooks, to help me expand and reimagine what my gayness, bisexuality, lesbianness, queerness, whatever-you-may-want-to-call-it-ness, had to offer to my life and to the world at large. As a Montessori teacher of adolescents, I find respite and love among my students, who continuously reinforce my own evolution of identifying as Queer. They inherently understand "queerness" as a set of values, a spirit, a way of being, and know that Queer folx belong to a history of rebellion and community activism. Somehow, they understand Queer as being far more than simply "gay," far more than a word that describes only one's sexual orientation. They see it as a major intersection on the vast roadmap of social identities, and respect how it gives dimension to peoples' worlds. I have to say, the kids are all right.

Most adults, on the other hand, are of a different time and vernacular. I have two fears when coming out to them: tokenization and reduction. Admittedly, I am not a good "token gay." I don't adhere to any of the stereotypes thrust upon the Queer community. I am hetero-passing, have a biological daughter, and am passionately critical of the modern Pride parade (it's absolutely a gentrified experience of what was once a radical, Black, trans, feminist movement). The reduction of my Queer identity to the simplistic understanding of "gay" as a sexual orientation makes me uncomfortable. For many years, I felt embarrassed and self-conscious talking about my queerness. I had impostor syndrome; I didn't look a certain way, or talk a certain way, and being gay didn't really *feel* like anything—even after I experienced the epiphanic revelation (whoa, I'm gay... now what?) that put my worldview into perspective. It took decades of exploring myself and befriending people from other minority cultures to discover what was so hard to put to words: the essence of Queerness has nothing to do with sexual orientation at all, but is actually an expression of something much richer, exciting, and, quite frankly, something dangerous to our current paradigm: being Queer, at its heart, is a radical noncompliance to the systems that exploit us all.

Queerness means vulnerable self-exploration and honesty. It means bravery in the face of adversity. It means vision and imagination. Queerness rejects forced norms and assimilations; it rejects anti-Blackness and misogyny; it rejects pigeonholed notions of what a family looks like, how much love is allowed between friends, who must perform what in society because of preconceived notions of what a "man" or a "woman" is supposed to be. It is the brave

act of turning totally inward to find truth with a quiet and listening mind *and* to express that resounding truth with unapologetic zeal. In essence, being Queer is so... *Montessori*.

I hope that when you imagine the Queer space inside my classroom, you don't think closet, but instead, see after-school Writer's Club. Young teens talk freely and passionately about their world and how angry their circumstances make them. They are unafraid of my eyes and ears on them, unafraid that their critiques could be misunderstood as teenage angst. Our Queer space means autonomous young people unafraid to oppose their teacher's thoughts, unafraid to tell me I am wrong. It is young people feeling safe to take intellectual risks, knowing that I will not stifle them with the narrow expectations they have come to know from the other adults in their lives. It is unthreatening. It is passionate. It is open tenderness and free love. My kids know without a doubt that they are seen with love, and that I will never measure them by their mistakes, but instead will encourage them to go after their truths. Being Queer has made me brave, being brave has made me vulnerable, and being vulnerable has led me to a rich and unique relationship with my classroom that I could never have forged without the queerness of my spirit leading the way.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The author talks about being unafraid. What fears do you have about having a conversation with someone who has shared their true self with you?

- How can you bridge the gap between your fears and engaging in a meaningful dialogue?
- What fears do you have about doing or saying the wrong thing with students or parents?
- What steps can you take to move forward anyway?

The author has created spaces for students to be their authentic selves.

- How can you create those spaces/activities for your own students, your teachers, your instructors, your parents?
- What examples have you seen of this in other classrooms, schools, or teacher education programs?

MONTESSORI AND DISABILITY

By Sid Mohandas

TRACING THE ROOTS

A good place to start to talk about disability and Montessori is to return to the roots of the Montessori pedagogy. Montessori began her work with disabled and neurodivergent children at the University of Rome's psychiatric clinic. In her speech at the 1898 Pedagogical Congress of Turin, contrary to the dominant scientific beliefs of the time that positioned disability and neurodivergence as a pathology requiring medical interventions, Montessori addressed disability and neurodivergence as chiefly a pedagogical issue: the system of education was seen to fail children. That she addressed systemic issues here marked an important shift.

UNCOVERING WHITENESS

While this shift is noteworthy, Montessori's views were simultaneously problematic, as they relied on the notion that disability and neurodivergence was a deviation from the "normative human" experience, and was something to be rectified. Critical disability scholars as well as postcolonial, decolonial, and anticolonial scholars identify the "normative human" as being shaped by the Western bourgeois model of "human." The Jamaican scholar and poet Sylvia Wynter (2003) refers to this as the "overrepresentation of Man": that is, the white, non-disabled, neurotypical, cisgender and heterosexual Man "overrepresents itself as if it were 'human.'" Montessori's developmental perspectives, along with other Western developmental theories that emerged contemporaneously, were shaped by wider colonial capitalist rhetoric on development, in which colonial violence was justified as a civilizing mission—the imposition of a particular view of development on Indigenous and non-Western people—and where the "rational economic non-disabled Man" was placed at the apex of civilization (Rollo, 2018; Mohandas & Osgood, forthcoming).

Contemporary critical disability scholarship and activism has contested the medical model that pathologizes the individual. Instead, a greater emphasis has been placed on how societies, knowledge systems, and institutions disable or enable bodies. Therefore, a disabled person is disabled by the society, and a non-disabled person is enabled by the society, because the society is designed and constructed with the non-disabled and neurotypical person in mind. Discrimination in favor of non-disabled and neurotypical people is called ableism. Understanding what institutions, knowledge systems, and practices do to bodies is fundamental to addressing ableism.

ADDRESSING ABLEISM

Addressing ableism is integral to dismantling whiteness. We must start from the premise that Montessori as a pedagogy and institution (similar to most other pedagogies and institutions) is ableist. Simply adding disabled people

to existing ableist institutions and practices does not constitute inclusion, nor does mobilizing interventions that seek to change the disabled person to conform to narrow definitions of what constitutes “normative.” At the core of addressing ableism is interrogating what constitutes “normative” and identifying ways in which existing structures uphold normativity.

Recent scholarship highlights how capacities and abilities of bodies are enabled or disabled only in relation to the nonhuman world (Feely, 2016). For instance, introduction of stairs can enable some people to access different levels, but can disable others who may be enabled by instituting ramps for wheelchair use. What a body can do is always contextual. This means there are no static solutions; rather, addressing ableism is an ongoing endeavor that requires continual dialogue with those in disabled communities, where decisions must always take place in the presence of those who will bear their consequences.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

We label ourselves in different ways. For example, one individual might say “I am autistic,” while another might say “I am a person with autism.” We also apply labels to people who are different from us: “That person is disabled.” “That event is just for the deaf community.”

What does it mean to give someone a label? What does it mean when someone gives themselves a label? In what ways do or can labels support the concepts of ableism, and in what ways do or can labels support understanding or community?

What labels have you given yourself? What labels have others given you that you have internalized? What impact did this have on you?

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Consider these words, from Koren Clark, about personal transformation:

I definitely say that there is a formula for the self-preparation that people need to look at. They really need to do the transformative work that's necessary. Not everybody is willing to do that. But once you do that self-transformative work, it shows up in everything you do. Education is transformative.

As educators, we cannot defend the psychic and spiritual development of a child without defending and raising humanity. It takes a child with a liberated spirit to autonomously solve problems on the shelves in their classroom and in the social conditions of their world.

-KOREN CLARK

PAGAN MONTESSORI AND DISRUPTION

By Melissa Kelly

AS a pagan, I believe that humans are not separate from nature. There's no such thing as an objective observer; we are all united with matter and energy, and magic is a real force in the universe. So it's weird that I'm the physical science teacher for my TEP, right? Why would a person who thinks magically teach a subject that deliberately delegitimizes and condescends to subjective, traditional ways of knowing the world?

The European story of scientific thought is linear—it tracks progress from “primitive” ways (traditional cosmologies that unite magical thinking with human curiosity and discovery) to “advanced” thinking (Western, reductionist, objective, empirical). This story is evident in our albums. When we repeat this story in our teaching, we make the mistake of leading children to the old lie: that knowledge progresses in a vertical line from simple to complex, with Western society's mindset and modes of operation as the end goal.

Most science stories are tales of seventeenth- to twentieth-century European men who isolated and studied one aspect of nature. We ignore and don't teach about a whole swath of human population because we don't consider what they were doing to be “pure” science. It makes sense why this happens: we exist in an industrialized, materialist culture that values the relatively recent divorce of the scientific method from the subjective experience of natural phenomena. However, even in Europe, before the eighteenth-century advent of Materialism, experimentation wasn't disconnected from the awe and wonder humans felt for nature. The early alchemists, like Roger Bacon and Nicolas Flamel, believed that experimentation with elements influenced the purification of the human soul. Isaac Newton himself considered gravity to be awesome evidence of divine intervention.

Reverence for the magic of nature is precisely what draws me to science. I share the children's curiosity and drive to explore. I want them to know that the personal experience of finding a pattern and investigating it is a truly human endeavor, practiced by people in all places throughout time. The Cosmic Curriculum provides an ideal bridge between my pagan lens and science. Physical laws are presented in a way that recognizes intricate connections between humanity and the universe, respecting traditional ways of knowing. Teaching “cosmically” allows me to show that seeking to understand nature is a timeless human tendency.

So what if we all teach from this perspective? We can start by placing the scientific method firmly on the human timeline as *one* way of “doing science,” thereby acknowledging the experience of other cultures. Then we can do what Montessorians do best: tell stories. There are tales of ingenuity from all groups and eras for each topic in our physical science and biology albums (atoms, botany, classification, chemistry, magnetism, medicine, simple machines, and more!) We can seek out these stories and share them, bringing life to the patterns and ideas we want the children

to uncover. Generally, the method by which people discover the world and explain it is connected to their culture. Framing lessons in this way connects our Science curricula to History and Geography.

Here are a few guiding questions for planning cosmic Science stories:

1. *Who are the “firsts”?*

For example, who was the first culture to make a discovery or an invention? A bit of research can help locate the originators of an idea. Some examples: When teaching electricity and batteries, go beyond Alessandro Volta and tell stories of the Inca and their knowledge of electric eels, or the practice of electric fish-based medical shock therapy in ancient Egypt and Iran. As an introduction to magnetism, discuss the ways in which lodestone was used in China. When discussing taxonomy and classification, go beyond Linnaean classification to share ways the Tzeltal of Mexico or the Hanuno’o of the Philippines classify plants according to their own sacred hierarchical systems¹.

2. *How can we practice “Ecology of Place”?*

Ask: “What life forms are native to our location?” “What human stories or inventions are historically related to this ecosystem?”² “How can we include native voices in our lessons?” “Who can we contact to share with us firsthand?”

3. *How can we balance lessons in our classrooms in a way that shares joy in ageless human scientific exploration while also communicating modern modes of scientific discovery?*

Understanding how science relates to human culture has helped me reframe my approach to teaching. I deliberately use a deep history lens. I seek out science stories that honor the ingenuity of humanity. Teaching discoveries in this context can open up new ways of thinking for children who up to this point have only heard about science from a Western perspective. Like me, they may not see themselves reflected in traditional Western science curricula, but with a broader view, they will come to understand that people just like them innovate all the time. Science does not have to be divorced from nature, from the divine, from magic. What better way to “keep it cosmic”?



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How do you honor who you are and not lose yourself while also honoring the culture of your students or adult learners? How much of yourself do you need to share with colleagues or parents if you want your personal choices or your life choices to be private?

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Learning and Unlearning

COUNTERING MYTHS IN MONTESSORI EDUCATION

By Maati Wafford and Mira Debs

“The very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again your reason for existing.”

-TONI MORRISON (1975)

THE influence of race and racism in our countries, in our education systems, and in Montessori education deeply impacts the environment surrounding each individual Montessori educator and their students. In this dialogue, we (Mira Debs, a sociologist who researches Montessori education, and Maati Wafford, a Montessori practitioner) will address three common myths that we have encountered about Montessori education’s “special” status as an anti-bias, antiracist form of education. We argue that Montessori is not automatically an anti-bias, antiracist method, but rather is influenced by teacher and social contexts of racism and other forms of systemic bias. We have a responsibility to learn about race and racism in our Montessori settings and in the wider world of our own countries and abroad, and then use this knowledge to change our practices.

Montessori Myth #1: “Montessori education is automatically culturally affirming because it follows the individual child.”

In our research and practice, we have repeatedly heard Montessori educators assert statements like, **“I’m a Montessori educator. I see each child as an individual; I don’t see color!”** They suggest that because they follow Maria Montessori’s guidance and their own training in viewing each child as an individual, they are not influenced by race, and are certainly not racist! While the practice of observation without judgment is immensely powerful, it is rare for any of us to be able to turn off the prisms of race around us. The sociologist Eduardo Bonilla DeSilva calls this response to “not see race” **colorblind racism**; being able to “ignore” race in this way is more often a benefit of those at the top of the racial hierarchy. Through asserting a colorblind view, educators do not examine the way their own small, everyday actions may continue to perpetuate racism.

MIRA: There is a long history of structural racism in the United States and other countries around the world; this influences each of us. Structural racism means that power structures, including institutions, laws, and daily practices, give power to one group over another. In many countries around the world, people have constructed racial hierarchies that have placed Black and Indigenous people at the bottom of the social system. In the United States, where slavery was legal from 1619 (with the arrival of the first enslaved people) until 1865,

discrimination against Black people was part of the economic structure of both the North and the South, was written into founding documents like the Constitution, was the central conflict over the Civil War, and still remains unresolved today, despite the efforts of so many activists. Indigenous people of sovereign nations were repeatedly murdered and removed from their land. Today, they still fight for the recognition of their tribal sovereignty, and the preservation of their languages and ways of life.

Schools, as a major social institution, are part of this pattern of structural racism. This means that schools are both places that work to expand opportunities to individual students *while also* following discriminatory practices that result in unequal treatment for students. Structural racism has been present in American education throughout history; its impacts endure today. The academic framework of critical race theory, used in both legal studies and education research, has been a space for identifying where and why these patterns persist, although critical race theory has also been weaponized by those who oppose conversations about race and racism, arguing that it blames individuals and creates greater divisiveness among groups.

Here are a few examples of some of the ways that structural racism has existed and still exists in American education:

- In the 19th and 20th centuries, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools where they were stripped of their language and culture and often abused. Many died while in custody (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).
- The 1950s and 1960s saw violent resistance to school segregation. In some states, like Virginia and Arkansas, laws passed that closed schools rather than implement desegregation. As predominantly Black schools closed, Black teachers across the South lost their jobs (Rooks, 2017).
- Systems of local control fund schools based on the wealth of the surrounding community. Racial segregation and government redlining has increased the values of neighborhoods with white residents while undervaluing communities of color (Rothstein, 2017).
- Residential (white) gentrification in many cities displaces BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) families from their neighborhoods and community schools (Posey-Maddox, 2014).
- Urban schools that close today are overwhelmingly in predominantly Black neighborhoods (Ewing, 2018).
- Beginning in preschool, Black and Latinx children are disproportionately disciplined and suspended from school (Morris, 2016).
- Within racially diverse schools, white and Asian American students are disproportionately placed in higher-track programs (Tyson, 2011).
- In 2018, 79% of US public school teachers are white, despite a public school student population that is over 50% students of color/students of the global majority (NCES 2022a, b).
- Laws passed recently in a number of U.S. states limit/prevent discussion and teaching about race and racism and LGBTQ issues (Mervosh, 2022).

If you live in a country other than the U.S., how does race/racism impact schooling environments? How does educational inequality map to specific ethnic, religious, gender, and caste groups? What are differences between rural and urban students and by social class?

MAATI: Montessori education is not by default an anti-bias anti-racist or culturally affirming space or method of learning for BIPOC children. As I work with Montessori leaders, educators, and adult learners each and every day, I often lead with words from scholar Lerone Bennett Jr. who stated, “An educator in a system of oppression is either a revolutionary or an oppressor.” I find it necessary to apply this same logic to Montessori schools as a way to dispel the myth that a Montessori education equates to liberation for all children simply because we earned a credential and believe in following the child. It is not enough to align with Montessori pedagogy. If our spaces are not explicitly prepared to dismantle oppressive systems and bias, then we are doing a disservice to our students and families. We are also not following Montessori’s vision of adults working with children to save humanity.

In reflecting on how these structural issues impact each of us, Montessori educators must commit to truly “seeing” their students. Yes, they are individuals and each of them need to be seen in all of their Blackness (and in all of their queerness, in all of the ways in which they think and process information differently, in all of ways in which their physical bodies function differently, in all the ways their religious beliefs call into question what is considered “normal,” and so on). I challenge educators to ask themselves, “What parts of their identity must my students hide when they are in my classroom or school community?”

Montessori Myth #2: “Yes, racism exists in traditional education. But Montessori is different because Maria Montessori focuses on peace and social justice.”

We have been inspired by the eagerness of Montessori educators to participate in antiracism training and lend support to endeavors like Montessori for Social Justice and the Black Montessori Education Fund. We have also experienced Montessori educators who defensively state that Montessori is a special, protected space separate from bigger social problems, and issues of racism and bias do not apply here.

It can be painful to acknowledge that there is also racism in Montessori education, and this comes out in a variety of ways, including restricted access to who can participate in Montessori education and how fidelity becomes a marker of status for certain organizations, schools, and families.

MIRA: While Maria Montessori is often described in heroic terms in the Montessori community, it’s important to discuss that she made racist statements in her letters about Mexicans she met while traveling and Indians she taught while working in India in 1939. These statements were reflective of her Eurocentric views (Hawthorne, 2019; Debs, forthcoming), and her biases are also reflected in some aspects of the Montessori curriculum.

Renewing the Montessori Curriculum is a group of Montessori practitioners who have put together an e-book to update the Montessori curriculum, using the Montessori Method's liberatory principles to a lens of equity and



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cultural responsiveness for all students. The group is also considering what current practice needs to shift to meet Dr. Montessori's original vision through rewriting lessons and stories, creating new lessons and stories, and developing Montessori material to be used in classrooms. Scan the QR code below for more information.

Montessori educators, following the lead of Maria Montessori, have historically emphasized preserving the fidelity of the method through an emphasis on teacher training, the use of Montessori materials, and following Montessori classroom practice. While this emphasis on fidelity has maintained a coherence of the method, it has had racialized consequences in who can access Montessori education in the United States and elsewhere. A significant result of fidelity has been its gatekeeping function: it has kept out people who were not able to afford training or Montessori materials, or who live in places that do not have local Montessori training and materials manufacturing.

Today, based on data from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector and AMS respectively, there are 565 public (free-tuition) Montessori schools and well over 4,000 private Montessori schools in the United States. Around the world, while there are some pockets of government-supported Montessori programs in the Netherlands, India, and Thailand, the majority of Montessori schools are private (Debs, forthcoming). The fact that the majority of Montessori schools charge tuition is a serious equity issue, as it limits access to Montessori to wealthier families. Who has allowed these programs to stay this way?

Even when a Montessori school is public or government-funded, there are still obstacles that can make it hard for some families to enroll. In many cases, Montessori is a “opt-in” choice school that families need to know about, and there are often barriers to enrollment that restrict access (waiting in line to register, paying for private preschool in order to access the public elementary program, providing their own meals and transportation to schools, which are often located in gentrifying neighborhoods). In fact, the desirability of Montessori programs can even fuel gentrification and displacement. One Oklahoma teacher told me that after a public Montessori school opened in her city, property values around the school increased more than 50% in a single year.

Even beyond enrollment challenges, some of my initial research suggests that Montessori educators can emphasize qualities that may not appeal to all families, with racialized consequences. For example, when Montessori educators talk about putting children in charge of their learning, emphasize the non-academic aspects of Montessori, or don't assign homework, this can lead to a perception that Montessori is not academically rigorous. As a result, choosing Montessori can feel risky for families with histories of being denied educational opportunities. How can educators speak about Montessori in a way that is accessible to *all* families?

MAATI: When you look closely at Montessori philosophy, you find that it incorporates much of the cosmologies of people of the global majority. Reverence of the child, grounding education in the development of the senses and practical life, seeking out one's cosmic task for the greater good—this is how entire cultures of people have been living since the beginning of human life. As a Black mother, Montessori philosophy drew

me in for the ways in which I was able to see my worldview uplifted. On the other hand, my first visit to a Montessori classroom gave me pause. I did not sense a connection right away. I saw a very sterile space that felt very focused on order and quiet, and I wondered about that.

As I began Montessori teacher training, I learned more about how Montessori classrooms are informed with children's development in mind, including, sensitive periods for order and coordination, etc. At the same time, through my study as a social worker and my own lived experiences, I also understood that within our sociopolitical context, perfectionism, power, oppression, and control definitely penetrates any prepared environment. Our Montessori spaces are permeable. They also reflect the larger system of education. In the United States, dominant narratives about race, class, culture, ability, etc. set the norms. For example, we see mostly white women teaching BIPOC children. Montessori is not exempt from any of these societal issues as relates to bias and inclusion in curricula and classrooms. When the conversation is about fidelity, my focus as an equity practitioner is how authentic and faithful we are as we ensure justice.

Montessori Myth #3: “Montessori is just starting to become more diverse.”

MIRA: Another way that we see racism impacting Montessori education is through the erasure or failure to commemorate Montessori educators of color who were critical to Montessori education in the United States from the 1960s onwards. These educators were visionaries, but because of racist lending practices, they often lacked access to substantial capital to institutionalize their schools. As I document in my book, Roslyn Williams, a Black educator, founded CHAMP (the Central Harlem Association of Montessori Parents) in 1967, and in 1968, she created the first Black-led AMS-accredited Montessori training program in New York. In 1964, Mae Arlene Gadpaille created the Montessori Family School in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, received Ford Foundation grants, and collaborated with architect Buckminster Fuller on a plan for a Black housing community centered around a Montessori school for children age birth to 18. Despite extensive fundraising, she was unable to raise the \$4 million to make her vision a reality. Moreover, both Williams and Gadpaille were attracted to Montessori because they saw a method that could be culturally affirming and an antidote to racism in their communities.

Latina teacher Dina Paulik created the first Montessori classroom in Dallas, which grew into the city's first public Montessori program. In Denver, Latina principal Martha Urioste created the first public Montessori program in the city in 1985, leading to a cluster of public Montessori schools. In both cases, public Montessori was a vehicle to create racially and socioeconomically diverse public schools that attracted students from neighborhoods around the city.

Although all these educators are beloved in their communities, they are often not well known in the broader Montessori community. For example, the AMS Living Legacy is an annual award that dates back to 1993. However, it was not until 2022 that AMS named its *first* Black honoree, longtime Miami public Montessori educator Juliet King, co-founder of Coral Reef Montessori Academy.

When I was researching my book, I was surprised to hear people talk about Montessori “recently becoming more diverse,” suggesting that Montessori education was only beginning to be adopted in communities

of color. They were unaware of the long history of these educators of color embracing Montessori for their communities. Addressing the history of bias and racism in Montessori means that we learn and recognize these histories, and pay attention to contemporary racial dynamics in the Montessori community (Debs, 2019; Murray et al., 2020).

MAATI: As Mira mentioned, one aspect of not being seen is that there is a largely white/dominant culture view that doesn't recognize or make space for BIPOC Montessorians by a process of omission or erasure. Another aspect of not being seen is that in many cases BIPOC communities *intentionally* situate themselves, their classrooms, and their schools under the radar—something that has also happened in many community-led Montessori schools that served BIPOC children.

For many historically marginalized communities, operating schools for their children was part of a strategy of self-determination: BIPOC-majority environments provided physical and psychological safety, which were essential to children truly flourishing in any prepared environment. In contrast, diverse spaces can present challenges to BIPOC students. Understanding the white gaze and making adjustments while in white spaces or, as it was described in my family, being in “mixed company,” played a huge part in how I have been socialized. Growing up in the South, this began at a very young age, as I grappled with the nuances of how I was to behave in front of “these white folk”—not necessarily because they upheld higher standards, or because we thought of them as “better than,” but because of the consequences of being seen by them, which could lead to further targeting and marginalization.

As I reflect on visionaries of color who have not been celebrated in Montessori education, I think of these very intentional, subversive practices of operating under the radar of mainstream society, particularly as it relates to how we educate young children. I am reminded how people of color are able to claim and reclaim their wholeness and function as self-determining people even while living in racist and oppressive conditions. Much of this required and still requires self-respect, agency, and setting clear boundaries among students and teachers alike.

I say all of this to articulate the fact that BIPOC communities have long utilized Montessori education as a way of educating children. It never depended upon nor has it ever needed validation from white people. What it did need, and often did not get, were fair and equitable business practices and access to educational funding and sustainability.

WHAT CAN I DO AS AN EDUCATOR?

Self-reflection: Engage in what Montessori described as “systematic study of self.” Once we earnestly seek to engage in deep self-reflection—the type of reflection that requires humility and radical truth-telling—we then begin to understand how we as educators can (and often do) hinder or harm our students. Believing wholeheartedly in Montessori philosophy, having a credential, and creating beautiful prepared environments means nothing if we have not sought to disrupt our own prejudices and internalized racism. This is truly the adult transformation that must guide our practice if we are to say that Montessori is truly about liberation and following the child.

Preparing your environment: Ask yourself these questions: What in fact am I preparing the environment for? How can I prepare the environment in my classroom, and, more broadly, in my school/organization/society as a whole, to allow BIPOC students to flourish? Throughout every aspect of our school and classroom spaces, there should be an emphasis on liberation.

Consider:

- the many ways you can thoughtfully embed liberation and justice throughout the curriculum, materials, libraries, and visual decor. Think: **Who is being silenced? Whose voice isn't being heard?**
- your evaluation, assessment and observation processes. Think: **What criteria is being used and why?**
- your school's policies, programs, and procedures. Think: **Who is part of the decision-making? Who benefits? Who is burdened?**

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We are all in different places in our development when it comes to anti-racist learning. Consider these words from Dr. Vanessa Rigaud; how can we all continue to grow?

...cultural differences are actually things we should celebrate and not see them as differences, because it brings a unique tapestry of what makes us who we are [as a people, nation, world]. And if we can begin to have those conversations that are deep and really acknowledge and honor that people are coming from different walks of life, like different places in their development, different places, in understanding ABAR, then we can begin to do something really meaningful and really powerful. In order for that to happen, people need to work on themselves and ask themselves, "How can I continue to grow?"

DR. VANESSA RIGAUD

THE ROLE OF UNLEARNING IN JUSTICE AND EQUITY

By Luz Casquejo Johnston

“**ALL** learning is unlearning.” This quote from scholar and social justice advocate Kevin Kumashiro brought my work as an Elementary Level Coordinator for the teacher education program at Saint Mary’s College of California into focus. During Kumashiro’s *Leading for Justice* workshop, I met other leaders in schools of education across the U.S. and Canada who were committed to creating programs that would help teachers create liberated learning environments.

It is the job of our teacher education programs to facilitate the transformation of the teacher that Dr. Montessori wrote about: “An ordinary teacher cannot be transformed into a Montessori teacher, but must be created anew, having rid herself of pedagogical prejudices. The first step is self-preparation of the imagination, for the Montessori teacher has to visualise a child who is not yet there, materially speaking, and must have faith in the child who will reveal himself through work.”

This is a whole learner approach. This is intellectual work, spiritual work—and it is hard. Kumashiro’s workshop challenged us to “trouble” notions of education—to investigate the foundations of the U.S. education system and its political underpinnings. If we want to understand what a system is meant to produce, we have to simply look at the products. If the products are inequitable outcomes and experiences, we have to change the systems. Training programs train guides to be scientists (as Montessori wrote, “the vision of the teacher should be at once precise like that of the scientist...”) who observe the environment and continuously look to improve it. If what a Montessori environment produces are inequitable outcomes, we are charged to prepare for equitable outcomes instead.

Montessori learning environments are not immune to biases and cultural preferences. While data suggests that Montessori schools fare better in terms of statistics that measure inequitable outcomes for children of the global majority, there are still gaps and preferences highlighted in the numbers. Just as one example, a study of discipline data (Brown and Steele, 2015) revealed disproportionate rates for African American students enrolled in Montessori school and traditional schools in the U.S. Southeast as compared with their White peers. While the relative rate index was lower in Montessori schools, there was still some disparity.

When faced with this data, I realized I had to unlearn what I had learned about our Montessori commitment to peace education. I knew that I had to trouble my notion of peace and how to get there. I began to dig deeper into works that called for justice. I studied the work of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Beverly Daniel Tatum. The common thread I found amongst these writings was that we Montessorians needed to connect more deeply to ourselves and to our students.

For me, that meant troubling my identity as a cisgender, educated, middle-class, Christian, Asian woman. I had to understand how I benefited and profited from the culture of white domination in this country that separates us into false hierarchies. I had to understand how the struggle of other marginalized peoples was my struggle too. I had to understand how liberation for all was liberation for me as well. True connection happens when we look beyond prescribed notions of who we are based on our racialized identities and identity structures. Once I was clear on who I was, I understood who I was called to be. Once that was clear, I knew what I was called to do.

JEDI (justice, equity, diversity, inclusion) work is universal work. I had to unlearn that this work could be done in containers—for example, in a single session in a course, or in a single course in a program. JEDI work had to become what I was and who I was. I began by thinking about every class I taught—History, Mathematics, Classroom Leadership. I wondered and reflected on how to focus on justice in each class. I troubled who was in the curriculum and who was not. I was fortunate to work with colleagues at Saint Mary’s College who had already radically reimaged and shifted the way they delivered their own curriculum (for teacher educators in the state high school credential program)—by focusing on embedding readings, assignments, and assessments to foster the development of critical consciousness. This was not just a class, but a way of being (Raygoza et al., 2020). It helped me to be in community with these colleagues as I reenvisioned how to create a program that developed critically conscious Montessori educators.

While my journey in my TEP was cut short when our program closed in 2019, my work has just begun. As Co-Chair of the AMS JEDI Committee, I hope to help leaders throughout our organization and movement understand how to unlearn, how to trouble, and how to change.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As this reflection mentions, Montessori learning environments are not immune to biases and cultural preferences. Innovation takes place when we commit to questioning, dialogue, and discussion. Much of our learning is actually unlearning.

What are the ways in which your classroom or school community is rooted in bias or exclusion?

How can you see the past as an opportunity to learn and understand history without being stuck in that history, or allowing history to get in the way of continuing to learn, develop, and evolve using a critical lens?

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Luz Casquejo Johnston discusses how peace may not be enough when it comes to true ABAR work, and why knowing oneself is an important step:

When we talk about justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, there's this tension between what is and what is not. And when we focus sometimes on peace, we're only focusing on "keeping the peace," which can be a way to silence dissenting voices and also a way to avoid any discomfort when it comes to implicit or explicit biases.

My training is in the Lower Elementary plane—children ages 6 to 9. When I think about my goal, I ask, How do I facilitate this unfolding of consciousness, this unfolding of purpose? I have to think about deeply knowing that child. For me, that means deeply knowing myself. What are my implicit and explicit biases, based on my own context, the context in which I grew up (which means cultural, generational, societal, religious)? All of those things, all of those pieces inform how I am in the world. And my job is to question how those things will inform my practice, which will then affect the children in my classroom.

If we can distill it into "This isn't about myself, this is about the child," I think that we can get past this discomfort because we can do anything in service to the child. I mean, the service of developing and unfolding human potential. I can be brave in that. I can say, okay, this makes me uncomfortable. For example, I am a cisgender Asian woman. I am always viewed in the world as Asian, based on my facial features. What does that mean for me? As a teacher of children who identify as Latinx, who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, what do I need to do in order to walk beside the children in my classroom? What are the brave steps I need to take in order to do that?

-LUZ CASQUEJO JOHNSTON

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE ERASURE: AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

By Sinuda Kapalczynski

MY experience is unique, just like yours. As an Akwesasne Mohawk, I grew up in the seat of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Onondaga language and culture classes were an integral part of my elementary school experience at the Onondaga Nation School. My family embraced traditional community practices and much of my identity stems from these foundational years of my life.

For many years, Indigenous language and culture have been successfully passed on to generations of children, but fewer and fewer people speak fluently. Some Indigenous communities have already Indigenized Montessori, and use the Method as a tool that enhances existing language and culture programs. However, there is still so much work that could be done in education and curriculum, especially by non-Indigenous peoples. Language and culture erasure did not happen overnight, but were structured government-endorsed assimilation programs that took place across the continent (and in most colonized places across the Earth); this continues to impact generations of Indigenous people.

For centuries, Indigenous Peoples of North America have been beaten and killed in efforts to “Kill the Indian, save the man,” as proclaimed by Captain Richard H. Pratt, the founding director of the most infamous assimilation program at Carlisle Indian School, a Pennsylvania institution that boarded children forcibly stolen from more than 140 tribes. Historically, throughout Canada and the United States, these Indian boarding schools and assimilation programs intentionally warped and corrupted the spirit of Indigenous children with the goal of erasing Indigenous identity. Because Indigenous children were censored or punished any time they tried to express their language and culture, they learned to smother and deny their identity in order to survive. The result? Thousands of Indigenous children were taught to hate themselves, their languages, their cultures, their identities. This collective intergenerational trauma is an unwanted legacy that has not been healed, and continues to create serious dysfunctions in Indigenous identities, families, and communities.

According to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, approximately one Indigenous language dies every two weeks. On the other hand, the Forum also declares that if Indigenous language, culture and educational “programs are designed specifically around decolonizing learning methodologies and prioritizing Indigenous perspectives, traditional Indigenous beliefs can be integrated into curriculums to preserve valuable cultural and historical views.”

Maria Montessori knew the importance of nurturing the child’s spirit and growing sense of identity and the Montessori method evolved to support and protect this delicate time of human development. She reminds us that “children are human beings to whom respect is due, superior to us by reason of their innocence and of the greater possibilities of their future.” It’s time to work to repair the damage that dominant and colonizer culture still inflicts on Indigenous Peoples—it’s time to Indigenize Montessori. It’s time to be intentional, culturally sensitive, and to take “an intentional, culturally sensitive, and appropriate approach to adding Indigenous ideas, concepts, and practices into curricula, when and where it is appropriate.”

The time is now to give due respect to Indigenous identities; our role as prepared adults can empower both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in their developing love for language and culture. We must do our best to be an ally to Indigenous Peoples today by purposefully sharing Indigenous culture in our classrooms, with our families, and with each other. Let’s Indigenize Montessori. Let’s walk the path together.

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I think ABAR has brought a breath of fresh air to Montessori education, because it was always my understanding of reading Montessori and being involved with people who were close to Montessori herself that equality was always a very high priority for Montessori educators. But they didn’t always know how to actualize it. They spent so much of their time working with children and training adults that they ran out of time and energy to attack all the issues that are involved in being at the center of this great revolution in education. And I see ABAR as part of that revolution.

I’m sure that if Montessori were alive today, she would wholeheartedly embrace ABAR because [racism] is a vestige of control and domination that has to be removed. It is an impediment to peace all over the world.

-CHARLES TERRANOVA

SNAPSHOTS AND REFLECTIONS, MEMORIES AND MOMENTS

By Lisanne Pinciotti

IN examining my own learning and re-learning about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, snapshots emerge in my mind, representing both general memories and specific moments in time. These snapshots prompt reflections—spiraling, repeating, connecting, deepening, and narrowing to a sustained purpose. Sharing these snapshots feels a little scary, yet meaningful. They represent only a few of many memories that have impacted my life. I have become increasingly aware of how my identity (white cisgender female, raised in the U.S. mid-Atlantic region by a mother and father in a large extended Catholic family) has shaped the lens through which I view the world—and I hope these snapshots and reflections can create space for me to continue to examine my own privilege.

SNAPSHOT: fourth or fifth grade, walking home from school with two friends. We see very young Black children playing on the other side of the street. My friend says, “They are so cute when they are little.” I don’t know what she means, and it makes me feel uncomfortable. I don’t say anything at that moment because I’m worried what they will think of me for asking. As I look back now, I believe this is the first memory I have of a racist comment, even though *racist* was not a word I knew or heard back then.

SNAPSHOT: college co-ed cheer teams at a Midwestern university. My partner is a Black man and over the years, a few of our teammates are also Black. After college, I continue with cheer, and our travel team captain, D., is a Black man. Each week, we travel to coach at different universities in Midwestern and Southeastern states. I love the experience; we learn so much about each other on those long drives. All of these Black men are fun-loving, easygoing, and seem to be treated no differently than anyone else on the teams. In hindsight, I wonder if that was true. One specific memory surfaces: I invite our travel team to my family picnic. Weeks later, I find out that a family member expressed anger that D. was there. I feel sad and upset, but don’t know how to follow up (or even if I should) since it wasn’t directed to me. I remember being grateful that my uncle told that family member he was out of line. I wonder now if D. felt or noticed it that day and didn’t let on. Following up with some of these past relationships might help me explore who I was at the time and what my impact was. I wonder if I caused harm to any of these folks. I wonder, and worry if reflecting is enough.

SNAPSHOT: I am an **Early Childhood teacher and administrator**. Our school moves from a large old public school building in a quiet, upper-middle-class town to a large old Catholic school building in a neighboring city. The buildings are literally less than two miles apart but described by some to be “worlds away.” The experience of having to convince families to trust the new setting and bring their children to the city awakens a new perspective in me. What is it about the geographical boundary of a river that gives parents a different impression of the school? What is it about the city that feels so different from the little town across the river? I am a parent; my children will attend this school also, and while these shared conversations seem to help, others are not convinced. I often wonder how folks developed this prejudice. Is it from their own experiences, or lack thereof? Am I naive since I am a transplant to this area? This is something I continue to discuss with colleagues and friends to help me better understand the roots and perception of difference.

One parent teaches me **the difference between Black and black**. “One is a person and one is a crayon,” she says. We talk about what it means to be Black; she wants me to know what she needs to do to prepare her son to live in America where whiteness is the “rule of law.” I begin to notice the ways that whiteness allows entry or preference. It takes concerted effort to notice, and more effort to figure out how to make it visible to others. It will be years before I feel confident enough to call out racism in group situations.

SNAPSHOT: I am now a **faith formation teacher** in our church community (Catholics call the program CCD (Catechesis of the Christian Doctrine)). Growing up in Catholic schools, I was taught to care for those who were less fortunate. I volunteered for organizations and school initiatives that provided resources to those who were sick, poor, imprisoned, etc. At the time, I did not consider other ways that folks may have needed additional support based on aspects of their identities that were not often obvious. Now, as an adult leading classes for young people within our church community, our discussions of identity and “need” continue to expand and impact our discussions of how to help, who needs help, and what is considered “help.” One example is neurodiversity: J. is a student in my CCD class who has been diagnosed on the autism spectrum. Our time with J. helps us all learn more about what an inclusive setting means and requires of each of us, as we work to form a mutually supportive community. Reflecting on this experience, as well as on my interactions with other neurodiverse folks in my immediate and extended family and the classrooms I lead, I see another opportunity to create awareness and strengthen belonging. The moments compel me to develop a Montessori Inclusion Endorsement (MIE) program at our TEP, and work to spread awareness among other TEPs about the impact the MIE can have.

SNAPSHOT: **Marlene Barron** has long influenced my professional growth. In the 1990s, I regularly attend her lectures and workshops. She uses the term “multi-multi,” and challenges us (me) to expand ideas of how “multi” is reflected in our schools. This term, she says, refers to everything: multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-faith, multi-anything. Back at my school, we explore why routines and rituals become patterns of behavior, and ask ourselves how we can rethink those routines/rituals so that everyone feels they belong. In 2021, the last year of Marlene’s life, she and I talk often; I am especially eager to know how she experienced prejudice or difference. She was honest and brave, and reflected on how she could not believe that, at her age, she had not truly explored her own privilege. She found that process interesting and educational even at this point in her life. Like others who were mentors along the way,

Marlene was the essence of a lifelong learner. Even after her death, I am grateful for her voice in my head. As I form new questions, I wonder what she might ask to push my thinking a little deeper.

SNAPSHOT: I am a member of the AMS Teacher Education Action Commission. We begin a book club; a different member chooses the book each time. *White Fragility* is one of the choices; it is one of the first books that helps me consider more specifically my role and possible impact as a white woman in society. I learn the importance of standing back to listen in group settings, rather than being the first to talk. I learn more ways to measure my perspective on life in the context of my privilege, and how to consider instituting systemic changes within spaces I lead. Most importantly, I learn how important it is to stand in vulnerability, take risks, and do my best to restore relationships when I get it wrong. Writing this piece feels *really* vulnerable, but I do so with the hope of prompting others to join these conversations!

My **identity work** evolves with each interaction. I integrate new feedback into what I've already learned, which expands my understanding and perspective. This work feels dynamic, not static, and I hope it remains a "burning flame of imagination" that propels my education. As my learning deepens, it also loops back to those memories/snapshots in my mind. Each time I interact with folks in my world, I consider what I should fold into my life practice after learning more from their unique perspective and life experience. Who are we if not humans that grow inward *and* outward from our interactions with each other?

This journey of mine is a spiral, a never-ending process that continues to loop back around, but on a new level or plane over time. It allows me time to process and reflect, but also to do and act. It's in the doing that I hope to make an impact.

This essay is a small window into my personal life and the ways these snapshots have been woven into my professional life. I offer the reflection as it stands today, knowing that tomorrow, I want to have deeper self-awareness for having shared it. I offer blessings and good effort for our collective journey and look forward to the day I can walk beside and learn from you.

Peace be with you and your spirit.

INTERNALIZED INFERIORITY

By Kiran Paek

SEVERAL years ago, I accepted a position as director of a teacher education program in Beijing, China. I was so excited, and I threw all my energy into designing the course, setting up environments, and interviewing Chinese instructors to be part of the team. I thought I was ready for any challenge—but what I didn't see coming was bias, prejudice, and discrimination.

About 35 adult learners enrolled in the course. The first few days went well, but on the fourth day, I received a message from the program's executive director informing me that 19 of the adult learners had signed a petition demanding that all the Chinese instructors be removed from the course, and that *I* teach all subjects instead. I was shocked. The instructors had all been approved by AMS, they had solid teaching backgrounds, and I had been working happily with them for weeks to prepare the courses.

I called a meeting to listen to the adult learners' concerns. They questioned the Chinese instructors' qualifications and stated that they didn't believe the instructors could deliver a high-quality program. Though the adult learners didn't say this out loud (Chinese culture often discourages confrontation or directness), I suspect they assigned more value to me based on my history. While I am also Asian (Korean), I had taught in the United States for many years and spoke English, while my Chinese instructors had never worked outside their home country and delivered their teaching in their native language. In China, English-speaking people, or those who have experience in America, are held in high esteem, no matter their background or level of education. If someone is white, speaks English, or has traveled/worked in English-speaking countries, they are often given precedence over native Chinese, even if their qualifications are lacking. The reverse can be true as well—highly-educated Chinese are often passed over for positions for which they are very qualified. To see this discrimination from Chinese adult learners against instructors of their own race was upsetting to me, but once I began to understand it, I knew I needed to act.

Rather than passing judgment on the adult learners' actions, I instead firmly shared my support for my instructors. The meeting took most of the morning, but in the end, I was able to convince all adult learners but one to stay on and finish the course with the Chinese instructors in place. It ended up being a great success, and afterward, 10 of the adult learners traveled to an AMS conference in the U.S. to advocate for our program—which led to increased enrollment in our next cohort.

This incident was a great lesson for me. In successive years, I continued to advocate for my Chinese instructors, and spoke with adult learners about the possibility that one day they themselves might become teacher educators. I tried to stress the importance of them growing into leaders in their own country and told them I would support them in this endeavor.

I've lived in China for many years now, and perspectives have begun to shift. Many Chinese teachers have indeed become teacher educators, and programs are thriving. But some of this same bias and prejudice against Chinese teachers still exists. It is difficult to talk about these issues openly, since Chinese people tend to be more reserved and less direct than Americans. Because of these cultural differences, talking about unconscious bias, equity, inclusion, and other ABAR issues may look different in China; any discussions will need to be approached slowly, with sensitivity, and in a space where participants feel safe. If that can happen, I believe we can move forward and challenge each other to have some of these hard conversations.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The author shared the decision to take time to listen to and understand the reasons and concerns of the adult learners before moving forward. It is easy to judge a situation by our own background, our own culture, our own experiences. But when we do that, we often miss the true nature of what is happening.

Has this happened to you? What did it feel like when someone tried to fix a problem without knowing the real cause of the problem? Or has the reverse happened—have you tried to fix a problem that you thought you knew the cause of, only to find that you didn't? What were the results?

It can take time to truly hear another person's perspective, but one way to move forward when there are differing opinions is to step back and see where you can find common ground. Have you experienced this approach before? If you have, what did it feel like? How can you build in the time to find common ground, to get to know the why behind the what?

Q & A WITH KIRAN PAEK

What do you think becomes of us when we don't believe in our own value/expertise?

We will become like machines—robotic—if we don't believe in our own values and expertise. Our effort will be limited to crossing things off our daily to-do lists. Our value helps us thrive and be human beings who can relate with people around us. Our expertise drives us to influence our community to be a better place for all of us.

Why do you think Chinese educators are not seen as credible?

White culture has been held in high esteem in Asian culture for a long time. It's hard to admit that due to a longing to become like white people, some Asians, especially women, cover their whole body when they are exposed to the sun lest their skin get any darker. Learning English is prized as well; those who only speak their native tongue are often seen as less educated.

After living in China for several years, I can share my observations about Montessori there. Montessori in China has a fairly short history; only about 20 years or so. As a result, there are not many well-trained teachers and instructors to serve in the school communities, and educators are brought in from overseas. A similar thing happened in the United States in the Montessori resurgence in the 1960s; many schools hired teachers from France, England etc. Montessori in China is going through some growing pains now, but I do feel confident that the Montessori community will make the transition from this kind of bias to having a positive attitude towards their own teachers. At this stage, it isn't surprising that they prefer to have foreign teachers/instructors who have many years of long experience in teaching. As long as this is their reason (rather than any kind of racism or other bias), I can live with it.

And I observe that things are slowly shifting. Many qualified teachers stay in the classroom to teach children after they gain credentials, rather than moving "up" to become a principal. Parents witness the positive impact Montessori is having on their children and are starting to believe in the Method. I believe that in time, people in China will make the transition from their current biases and start to believe in the expertise and value of their countrypeople when it comes to Montessori education.

Aimee Allen reflects on the difference between some of the "color-blind" thinking of previous decades, and what we know today:

A lot of this comes from the work of Dr. Montessori and then the work of the American Montessori Society in its earlier days. What's going on in the world also is reflected in Montessori. So, in the 1960s and 1970s, this idea of equality versus equity—the idea that we're all the same and we're not going to call attention to our differences because we're all one people. That was revolutionary at the time. But now here we are, 60 years later, and we're looking at our history and realizing that by not calling attention to things, they get swept under the rug or people don't see them. It develops implicit biases, and we're not getting better as a society by ignoring our biases and pretending that we're all in the same boat. The evolution in Montessori is that we need to start actually pulling social justice out from under this umbrella of peace and give it very direct attention and direct language so that all the things that were being ignored—whether that was intentionally, or probably unintentionally being ignored—are now coming to the surface and to the front.

-AIMEE ALLEN

Making Positive Change

ASPIRATIONS IN ABAR LEADERSHIP

By Hilary Green

THE Barrie Institute for Advanced Montessori Studies has been on an ABAR journey as a teacher education program for the past few years. Our instructors work in a variety of school settings, and many had been doing DEI work within these settings. This sparked conversations about how we could incorporate this work into our teacher education program. We began with some guided professional development, and then started to introduce DEI practices and experiences into the course components in an incremental way. Instructors review lesson plans and presentation materials and consider if they represent a more global way of thinking—and if they do not, we make changes.

We welcome feedback from adult learners as well. For example, a few years ago, a group of Elementary II adult learners noticed that all the mathematicians included on the timeline were white males. The adult learners and instructor discussed how this was problematic and came to me with a proposal to revise the timeline to ensure greater diversity and representation moving forward, so that future adult learners will be offered information about a wide range of mathematicians throughout history.

Another example is within our Early Childhood Social Studies curriculum. The instructor has had the adult learners create lessons and activities that focus on covering aspects of social justice with young children. The lessons created include discussions on diverse family structures, peace and social justice, and language around gender identity. The creation of these lesson plans has led to interesting discussions about adult learners' own school experiences, as well as things that they notice within their practicum placements.

On the instructor side, each of our faculty meetings now includes some kind of ABAR professional development. Whether it is watching a video or reading an article and then having a discussion about it, or bringing in a speaker to join us, our growth as educators and as professionals has had a positive impact on the work we are doing with the adult learners. My goal as a TEP director is to create a space for instructors to feel comfortable with the topics, ask questions and share examples about how they may already be incorporating this work into the course components, and recognize that this is all part of the transformation process for ourselves and our adult learners.

As a program director of an AMS-affiliated teacher education program, I am proud of the work we are doing—and yet I know that there is much more to do. I cannot make these changes all by myself. We must do this as a team, and everyone needs to reach the point where they are comfortable creating space for difficult conversations and/or making adjustments to assignments when it is what is best for the adult learners in the program. As someone who also serves on AMS's Teacher Education Action Commission (TEAC), I am excited to see the direction that this work is taking. The intentionality in adding specific requirements around ABAR education and greater awareness in adding language throughout the Teacher Education Handbook and the AMS Fundamental Tenets for teacher

education programs shows a real commitment to this work. Ensuring that all TEPs are focused on this work will allow us to better see where voices are not being represented throughout our curriculum and give us the opportunity to continue to evolve and grow.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How do we move our thinking about DEI/ABAR work from a destination to a journey? How can we create opportunities and spaces where everyone in the community is empowered to ask questions and invited to search for solutions?

What makes this work a struggle for you? What internal and external challenges have, or do you face to create a community to do DEI/ABAR work?

Many Montessorians have reverence for their trainers and the way they were taught, and feel it's difficult to move away from outdated or problematic ways of thinking in their teaching. However, consider this quote from Aimee Allen:

I also think when you are talking about reverence for your trainer, one of the things that's really important is if you were trained 20 years ago, well, what's your trainer doing now? Your trainer has likely evolved as well. I mean, I see it in our [AMS] Peace and Social Justice Committee all the time. We have women in their 80s who are coming to the white anti-racist discussion group because they want to continue to learn. But maybe when they trained somebody 20 years ago, they didn't have the information that they have now. And that person they instructed 20 years ago hasn't seen the evolution of the trainer. So, I think it's important, too, to realize that we're all learning, we're all evolving.

-AIMEE ALLEN

THE NEED FOR INDIGENOUS MONTESSORI TEACHER EDUCATION

By Trisha Moquino

INDIGENOUS Montessori Institute (IMI) is an anti-racist Montessori teacher training program that centers the reclaiming of our Indigenous children's education. IMI is an offshoot of the Keres Children's Learning Center (KCLC), a not-for-profit educational organization that supports Cochiti Pueblo children and families in maintaining, strengthening, and revitalizing their heritage language of Keres. IMI features, among other offerings, a 10-module survey course called Reclaiming of Indigenous Education (RIE), which examines the components that make KCLC what it is, as well as the educational context that made KCLC necessary. IMI continually brings awareness to issues around Indigenous education and offers support for other educators, Tribal Nations, and educational institutions. The 10 RIE modules are:

1. History of Indigenous Education
2. Anti-Racism Training (via our partners at Embracing Equity)
3. Understanding the Story of Why KCLC Has to Exist
4. Diving Deeper into the Wider World of Indigenous Education in the U.S.
5. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies
6. Language Immersion Techniques
7. Indigenous Dual Language Education
8. Indigenous Knowledge Systems
9. Understanding By Design
10. Tyranny of Outcomes

This RIE survey course was needed because, to our knowledge, when we began planning it in 2017, no Montessori teacher training center offered any single one of these 10 modules, much less the whole course. RIE is available as a standalone course, or can be embedded in Montessori training through a partnership with the Southwest Institute of Montessori Studies (SIMS). In addition, IMI offers technical assistance to organizations developing their anti-racist muscles and expanding their critical consciousness. In 2023, IMI will offer two additional courses that take participants through a deeper, more detailed examination of two KCLC components: Indigenous Language Immersion and Indigenous School Leadership Design.

We cannot have a conversation about IMI without looking at why it—and the Keres Children's Learning Center (KCLC)—was needed in the first place. At the time the journey of KCLC started in 2006, Cochiti children's language

and culture still took a back seat in Head Start and public schooling. Unfortunately, this is still the case. New Mexico's Yazzie-Martinez court case (in which a judge ruled that the state of New Mexico was not providing an adequate education to Native American learners, English-language learners, children with disabilities, and children from under-resourced backgrounds) is a stark example. KCLC, now in its 11th year, has been held up as a model of what Indigenous education can be. We founded IMI in order to create a teacher pipeline for KCLC; our founding board of directors foresaw that we would not be able to send future teachers to existing colleges or universities because they would not come back trained in the way we needed them to be—for example, with an understanding of Indigenous Language Immersion pedagogy and Indigenous Dual Language Education, knowing the history of Indigenous education in the United States, and having had quality Montessori training.

IMI is more necessary than ever. Failure to educate our Indigenous children in a way that does not harm them can be seen in their poor reading and math scores, as reported by the educational assessment NAEP, state public education departments, and local public school district websites. It can also be seen in federal and state policies, such as the imposition of federal and Christian boarding schools, into the Bureau of Indian Affairs Day Schools, on to the Johnson O'Malley Act of 1932, and ending with the momentous Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico court case in 2018.

Education has always been done *to* us rather than *with* us, starting with the federal and Christian boarding schools where children were stolen from their Tribal Nations and families and taken hundreds and in some cases thousands of miles away from their families. When Indigenous children arrived at these violent institutions, they had their hair cut and were given military clothing to wear and were forbidden to speak their Indigenous languages. There is ample documentation for this. The PBS documentary, [Unspoken: America's Native American Boarding Schools](#), is an excellent resource with which to start. More information on the Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico lawsuit can be found at the New Mexico Law and Poverty Center and the Native American Budget and Policy Center. Four years after the court ruling, the state of New Mexico has yet to implement a remedy framework for the whole state.

Indigenous education has great potential. It can be an education where children are grounded in their languages and cultures starting in Early Childhood; steeped in the histories of their respective Tribal Nations; exposed to a general education grounded in anti-racism; and taught with the recognition that our children hold dual citizenship, first and foremost in their respective Tribal Nations, and secondly in the United States of America.

We ultimately want what Dr. Montessori called us all to do in educating the “whole child”—we want children to be able to realize their whole selves. Indigenous education in the United States, as it has existed for over 100 years, is a model that today is only graduating half of its students from high school. Teacher training, including Montessori teacher training, is complicit in this failure. We must reckon with the changes that need to be made. We are reminded that we must not take lightly the words of Dr. Marianna Soto-Manning: “Teacher education is deeply implicated in the reproduction of white supremacy. A mostly white teacher education profession prepares mostly white teachers to engaging practices rooted in racist ideas. It's no longer enough to denounce we must fundamentally transform what we do!” From the outset, IMI provides explicitly anti-racist, anti-bias teacher training.

And yet we realize that it will never be enough for a Montessori guide to just allow their students to explore their Indigeneity. The children must also see themselves reflected back to them in the classroom every day. And this is what the Montessori approach allows for. For example, with the Fifth Great Lesson, The Story of Numbers, children must be able to understand numbers in a way that is grounded in sharing and not just capitalism. We train our guides to understand the importance of reorienting themselves to geography; rather than looking at it from a position of

ownership, extractive resources, and political boundaries, we model a position of relationship *with* the land, maintaining existing natural balance, and discovering the human being's Cosmic Task in terms of reciprocity with Earth. There are countless other examples of guides who, after graduating from IMI, have been empowered to be lovingly critical of their Montessori albums and lessons, especially when they perpetuate narratives that are false and do not include all children.

In Montessori teacher training, Montessori teachers are expected to practice building muscle memory with the materials. The same need for muscle memory needs to be applied to developing our anti-bias, anti-racist muscles and our critical race consciousness. We need to expand our lens and bring that expanded critical consciousness into our practice. We can no longer talk about the “child” while being oblivious to the stats in America regarding Indigenous children. Dr. Montessori stated that “of all things, love is the most potent.” And it is with this deep love for our children and Indigenous people that we will continue to see IMI grow and thrive.

Britt Hawthorne charges us to work toward systemic solutions when it comes to ABAR work:

In Montessori education, just like in any other educational spaces in the United States today, we're novices in this [ABAR] work. People have so many assumptions about this work and oftentimes they think that they're a lot farther than they are. But they're really not far in their foundational work. They're just pretty far in their assumptions, their already-held beliefs that have gone unchallenged for a number of years. I don't think that people really realize where the starting line is, that it's so far back because for so long, we have not done work on a systemic level in Montessori education.

So, whatever our solution is, it has to be systemic, and it has to be comprehensive. Systemic, so that it happens regardless of if a school has buy-in or not. And comprehensive anti-bias work has to be our foundation if our goal is for children to reach their fullest potential. And that phrase “fullest potential”—in ABAR work, we think of it as liberation. I am at my fullest potential when I am my most liberated self, and if that becomes our overarching outcome, then that has to also be the foundation of the work.

The foundation, therefore, doesn't become the materials. It doesn't become the shelves, and it doesn't become the album. The foundation of the work becomes anti-bias, anti-racism. It is the spiritual preparation, if that is our outcome. So, just as Montessori started, you know, we start big and then we go small and then we end big. So, for us to start big, our foundation has to be antibias, anti-racist work. It has to be liberation work.

So, when teachers say, “Well, the time Montessori lived in...” it is an othering, distancing phrase to not acknowledge the times in which we live—the fact that Montessori schools are still so segregated, racially, ethnically, socio-economically; that our Montessori schools are ill-equipped to handle racist incidents; that our schools are still struggling with holiday policies, and how to make many different cultures an essential part of their classrooms; we're struggling with how to integrate Montessori principles into public education.

–BRITT HAWTHORNE

THE WORK BEHIND THE WORK

By Maati Wafford

MANY organizations have made very public statements about their stance when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion. AMS is one of a number of organizations across the globe who have committed themselves to anti-bias and antiracism work. And just like the others, it struggles and makes mistakes along the way.

Dr. Kevin Kumashiro is the author of *Troubling Education: “Queer” Activism and Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy*. His concept of “troubling education” asks us to reflect on our own identities, assumptions, frameworks, and practices, and to lean into uncertainty and discomfort in order to learn (and unlearn). By engaging in this kind of “troubling,” we can all do our part to challenge oppression in our interactions, classrooms, and school communities.

Examining equity calls for us not only to celebrate progress, but to also acknowledge the roadblocks and the harm that has been and continues to be perpetuated along the journey. If organizations aren’t able to look critically and honestly at their paths, then they are sure to repeat the same mistakes. This publication and equity audit is one way that AMS is attempting to trouble its commitment to anti-bias and antiracist education. Each day, AMS as an organization is challenged to negotiate and question how its leadership and its members contribute to social problems.

I had the opportunity to sit down with two of the first Black women to serve on the AMS Board of Directors—Amira Mogaji and Sandra M. Stevenson—and hear from them directly about their experiences and hopes for AMS and its leadership. Looking at the work around diversity, equity, and inclusion that took place behind the scenes at AMS is a way to deepen our understanding of the work that the Board has committed itself to. We must realize that not only is this work necessary for us to say Montessori is truly a liberatory way of education, but it’s also needed in order for us to continue to attract new funding resources and to be relevant and sustaining. Change is necessary for us to set standards for all member schools, and change requires self-reflection. And then, rather than feeling bad about what comes up in our self-reflection, we must acknowledge what’s broken, and commit to fixing it.

At AMS, we are normalizing the practice of having difficult conversations. As a result, we have heard from our membership that many people feel that having difficult conversations is easier for them now. For the larger goal of sustainability for our organization, for it to see a path forward, we needed to have some hard conversations and uncomfortable moments. It is important for our community to realize that AMS needed to face these challenges, a few of which are highlighted here.

Sandra M. Stevenson, an award-winning writer, visual editor, and curator, is deputy director of photography at *The Washington Post*. Previously, she worked at CNN and *The New York Times*, where she oversaw digital photo editors and worked on visual content for Race/Related and the Gender, in addition to exclusive projects such as “Overlooked” and “This Is 18.” Sandra was a contributing writer in the book *Unseen: Unpublished Black History from The New York Times Photo Archives*. Her first job out of college was at NBC, and from there she became program coordinator for

the Black Filmmaker Foundation, where she committed to helping people of color enter the film industry at various levels. Outside of work, Sandra serves on many boards. She is a former Montessori parent, a former AMS board member, and a current member of the *Montessori Life* editorial advisory board.

Dr. Amira Mogaji is the president of the AMS Board of Directors. She also serves as the AMS Board liaison for the AMS Peace and Social Justice Committee, on the AMS Directorship Committee, the AMS Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) Committee, and chairs the AMS Executive Committee. Throughout her career, Amira has served as a teacher, a CEO, and a school principal in traditional and Montessori school settings in urban school districts. She has also been a district transformation coach, supporting school principals, and is currently the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment for Battle Creek Public Schools (MI). Along with her AMS board service, Amira is a Montessori for Social Justice founding board member and an Eliminating Racism & Claiming/Celebrating Equality (ERACCE) board member. She is a Montessori parent and an ABAR educational consultant. She is AMS-credentialed (Administrator).

While I sat down separately with both Sandra and Amira, I found a number of overlapping experiences in their individual stories. Both spoke about feeling othered in their work on the AMS Board, as well as not having their competence fully recognized. And both had similar reasons for continuing to do the work, despite the challenges.

—*Maati Wafford*

WHAT'S BEHIND FEELING LIKE AN OUTSIDER ON THE AMS BOARD

Amira Mogaji: I have always felt and been treated as an outsider, whether it was because I was [working in] public school, whether it was because I was a Black woman, a Muslim, all of it. I've been an outsider, and I've been "outside" all my life. But it doesn't stop me from moving forward; I was just raised to go around barriers. Just like barriers can be placed, they can be removed by me.

As Montessori educators, we are trained to build community in our classrooms and school spaces. This is not just the nice thing to do; it is core to Montessori philosophy and speaks directly to our fundamental needs as humans. Inclusivity is a practice that the youngest of Montessori children learn. We strive to prepare our environments to blur the lines of who belongs and who doesn't. We intentionally create space for our students to all have a voice, and support them in perspective taking and sharing.

How do we prepare the environment as we engage other adults, both individually and in groups? It is critical that we challenge the ways in which our society has systematically excluded, marginalized, and targeted groups of people based on their various social identities. Who determines who and how we belong? We must be aware of these ways of being that influence how we see one another and thus impacts our abilities to work towards what is best for children. Currently the AMS Board is committing to a thorough look at all of its committee charters. This will be led by the Directorship committee and approached through an intentional liberatory framework. All committee members will work collectively to actively deconstruct any biased/exclusionary policies around decision-making, election and nominations and evaluations of its members and program activities.

WHAT'S BEHIND CODED LANGUAGE AND HAVING ONE'S COMPETENCY BROUGHT INTO QUESTION

Sandra Stevenson: As a person of color who grew up in Wyoming, which is pretty much full of white spaces, I already had the ability to understand people and what was said and not said in the coded language they used. Being on the AMS Board was no different. Sometimes I look back and chuckle and I think, did they not know that I knew what they meant the whole time? And, you know, there were times where I would call them out, but, you know, it's like, "I see you." And to think, If I see you, I'm sure other adults and children will see you too.

Coded language continues to present a challenge in our human interactions. It is often subtle and sometimes invisible, and other times overt and in your face. However, it is a highly charged style of discrimination that can be hard to articulate if you're unaware of it. This lack of awareness can happen in the person using the coded language as well as the person being discriminated against by it. Therefore, not being able to pinpoint what's happening also speaks to the subtle harm that coded language may have on one's psyche and/or self-esteem. Referring to someone as "aggressive" or "not a good culture fit," or using words like "urban" or "inner-city" when describing an ethnic group or community, are types of coded language. Within the Montessori community, an example of coded language could arise around grace and courtesy, particularly when applied to our evaluations of teachers—their mannerisms, how they give lessons, and how they speak or dress. Coded language is an easy way for someone, whether they know they're doing it or not, to maintain a position of power and hold back people who are different from them, without using explicit words.

WHAT'S BEHIND WHY THEY CONTINUED TO DO THE WORK

I asked both Sandra and Amira why, despite feeling like outsiders and facing coded language, they persisted in the work of the AMS Board, particularly when it came to ensuring that DEI principles were fully integrated into all of AMS's work. Several themes emerged in their answers:

- The Board had to change. If not them, then who else would do it?
- Representation was important. They wanted to show up, for the other board members to see their faces, to know they were in the room, helping make change.
- They were looking to the future of education, a future in which children who looked like them had access to Montessori education. The end game was really about serving children and families.
- They felt strongly that this was work they believed in—it was their cosmic task.

Amira Mogaji: "I allow myself my moments of pain and then I ask myself again, Is this still what you want to be doing? And every time, I decide to keep going. As a Black woman, I know that that's what we do to ourselves. We ignore the pain and we keep pushing, because that's the way, that's just our makeup. That's how we've been trained."

"Also, my work gives me confidence. Sometimes the work is self-care, because my competence makes me feel good, and reminds me that I'm in the right place and in the right space. That's what my actual job is in this world. And with AMS, when I'm holding these conversations, when I'm elevating things that need to be elevated, when I'm talking to the executive committee, when I know I'm bringing value—that actually is healing for me.

That actually is what builds me because I don't feel like my work is work. It's part of who I am. And my competence and my success in it is what heals me, because nobody can take that away from me."

"My prayer, my wish from the ancestors is that the conversation you're having with me right now doesn't ever have to happen again. That's what I really want. That's part of why I do what I do, why I continue—so that down the line this doesn't exist. Because I don't want this to exist. I don't want my kids to go through this. I don't want your kids to go through this. I want it to just to be a conversation about 'Oh, tell us about your experience on the board as a human'."