

Cultivating Learning Environments that Promote Peace Education and Social Justice

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The Radical Roots of Montessori Education:

Dr. Maria Montessori believed that aiding in the harmonious development of the child was the way to transform society. She argued that society wasn't preparing human beings for civic life. Subsequently, she dedicated her life's work to establishing an approach to education that emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration over competition, and the responsibilities of living peacefully and productively in a community. She also emphasized the necessity of addressing the holistic needs of the child—not only academic growth, but social, emotional, physical, psychological, and cognitive development as well.

Montessori called upon us to create a new world by interrupting the narrative that children are powerless, empty vessels to be filled with facts and information. She believed that our youth should be empowered with independence, confidence, and the ability to be socially conscious, global citizens. These are all essential, foundational aspects of this method.

Yet, after collecting data from over 100 people about bias and discrimination in Montessori environments, I confirmed that our community needs more explicit training in anti-bias education and social justice issues. More than 70% of respondents said that they've seen unfair practices that mimic oppression at Montessori schools.

We can all agree on this: *That number is entirely too high!*

Where do we start?

The work begins with us. It's part of the critical self-reflection required of us to become the best versions of ourselves before serving children, the "spiritual preparation of the adult."

Let's consider what we mean when we say "peace" or "social justice?" What do these terms mean to you? I'll give you a few minutes to think about that.

Some other concepts I invite you to explore more in depth to integrate into your classrooms are: *Identity, Stereotype, Prejudice, Bias, Privilege, Access, and Racism (individual vs. systemic)*.

In order for our children to become global citizens, they need to develop a deep sense of comfort with diversity and differences. Before we can guide our students on this path, we have to tend to these same characteristics in ourselves.

Acknowledging the Facts

Are children “color-blind,” as often suggested? No, this notion is simply not backed by social science. In fact, research shows that children already have preferences for faces of their own race by the age of three months!

Thus, it’s our duty to help children be color-conscious and approach differences in a celebratory manner. This includes giving them accurate language to describe differences in skin color, hair texture, physical ability, sexual orientation, and so on.

Does privilege exist? Yes, it does and this is something we can discuss with our children, in age-appropriate ways. This was a topic of discussion during my session at CAMT. “Who has the most privilege in our society?” I asked.

Participants took a few minutes to brainstorm and then ardently chimed in...

“Men!” “White people!” “Straight people!” “Cis-gender people!” “Able-bodied people!” Et cetera...

The subject of privilege can be uncomfortable and guilt-inducing for some, but there’s no need to feel regretful about having privilege. When used to amplify the voices and experiences of people from oppressed groups, privilege can be used as a tool for positive social change.

Confronting Bias

Yes, we *all* have biases. Does this mean we’re intrinsically bad people? Absolutely not! Most of our biases are implicit, meaning they form outside the realm of our conscious awareness.

According to influential social psychologist Henri Tajfel, people have in-group biases, which means we tend to give preferential treatment to those who are also members of groups to which we belong.

Once brought into our awareness, though, it’s our job to do the work to dismantle these biases within ourselves and our respective spheres of influence.

Embracing Anti-Bias Education

As educators, one of the most effective things we can do to run more equitable classrooms is familiarizing ourselves with the goals of Anti-Bias Education. This approach goes beyond the “tourist approach” often employed in schools that ‘celebrate diversity’ on a superficial level, but do not acknowledge how children develop biases and prejudices.

If you’re a reader, I highly recommend starting out with the Anti-Bias books written by Louise Derman-Sparks.

For an excellent free resource, check out Teaching Tolerance’s [Anti-bias Framework](#), which contains a plethora of helpful information for educators of all ages.

School leaders, if you're reading this, I highly encourage you to hire a consultant with expertise working around anti-bias issues. The necessary changes won't happen overnight and your staff will need on-going support throughout this process.

Building Inclusive Book Collections

Books are an excellent resource for facilitating discussions about differences and social justice issues in your classrooms. Let's make sure that our classroom libraries are full of diverse books—not only showcasing diversity in race, ethnicity, and linguistics, but also LGBTQIA+, folks with disabilities, people from different socioeconomic statuses and religions, from various families structures, etc.

Visit embracerace.org and socialjusticebooks.org for wonderful book lists for children (from toddlers to adolescents).

Difficult, Yet Critical Work

When we start asking ourselves how our classrooms are working for our most marginalized students, that's when we'll know that we are entangled in the work of social justice and peace.

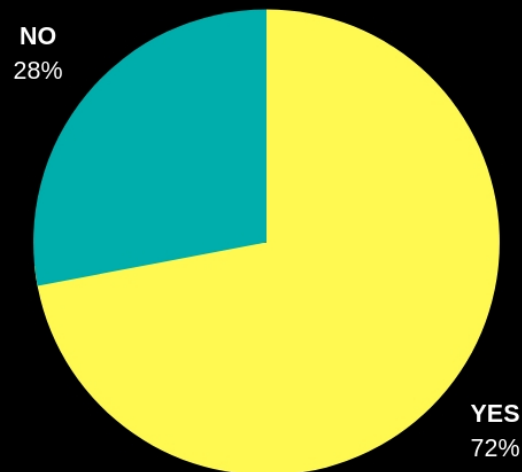
This is difficult, but necessary work if we are to create a new, more equitable, world.

I wish you luck on your journeys. May we work together in this effort. Our children and communities deserve it.



When asked...

Have you ever witnessed discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, social class, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation against children, families, and/or staff members in the Montessori community?



72% of respondents said YES!



BIO: Razan (she/her/hers) is a culturally conscious, anti-bias educator, facilitator, consultant, and writer. She is the founder of Razan Abdin-Adnani Consulting and Coaching, LLC, a woman-owned, NYC-based business which provides educational services to schools, organizations, and families on a sliding scale basis to ensure accessibility. You can find out more about her work at razanabdin.com.