

Moving Beyond Peace Education to Social Justice Education

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In the twentieth century, Dr. Maria Montessori used Cosmic Education as a way to educate humanity about the interconnectedness of all life. In the thick of wars and political aggression, Cosmic Education taught children to recognize the fundamental needs we all share and to respect the differences by which we meet those fundamental needs. However, because whole populations were displaced and the ways that whole groups of people have come to meet their needs were appropriated, access to peace is obstructed by systemic oppression. Cosmic, or peace, education, while a beautiful theory, is incomplete without the historical context and connection to social justice. Cosmic and peace education requires that we develop in children and in ourselves an understanding of the history of racial and social injustice and the tools to dismantle inequity, in ways that are significantly different than the current practices in most Montessori schools and teacher training programs today.

Together, as women of color in this field, we have felt the omission of this focus and we feel the impact of the omission of People of Color in the spaces and places where Montessori education is practiced, researched and taught. As Montessorians, we must ask ourselves the ways in which we practice peace education in our classrooms and what stories we share with our children. There is no doubt that Montessori education has the potential to serve as a liberating and decolonizing education; however, for this to be true, Montessorians must reflect on some uncomfortable truths: Who has historically received a Montessori education or Montessori teacher certification in America and why that has been the case? How have Montessorians perpetuated a false narrative of peace? At whose expense and why have only some children been able to receive this idea of peace education? Do we as Montessorians remind our children of those whose lands we inhabit? How can we feel peace in our hearts if we do not feel represented in the leadership of Montessori education? How do we, as a Montessori community, continue to amplify the voices of People of Color? Do we honor Dr. Montessori's charge of us as radical activists?

What Do We Mean By Just Peace?

In Education and Peace, Dr. Maria Montessori shared that if we want real peace, it must be a just peace:

Human history teaches us that peace means the forcible submission of the conquered to domination once the invader has consolidated his victory, the loss of everything the vanquished hold dear, and the end of their enjoyment of the fruits of their labour. The vanquished are forced to make sacrifices, as if they are the only ones guilty and merit punishment simply because they have been defeated. Meanwhile, the victors flaunt the rights they feel they have won over the defeated populace, who remain victims of disaster. Such conditions may mark the end of actual combat, but they certainly cannot be called peace. The real moral scourge that stems in every people on earth is marked by one wave after another of such triumphs and such forms of injustice, as long as such profound misunderstanding continues to exist, peace will definitely fail to fall within the range of human possibilities. (6-7)



Marigold Montessori, a Wildflower Montessori School

As Montessorians, we must be careful with the peace education narrative we are perpetuating and ask ourselves if that narrative is inclusive of what Montessori called the “defeated populace, who remain victims of disaster.” In order to be grounded in how to do this work, sometimes, we have to take time to sit with the uncomfortable truth and, when we are ready to take critical action, know that the action needs to be deeply informed by proximity and lived experience.

Bryan Stevenson, the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, is a widely acclaimed lawyer who has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned. Stevenson addressed Montessorians at the 2016 American Montessori Society conference and challenged us to think of justice as peace, to face the truth, and engage in deep reconciliation. Stevenson stated that if we as a country do not tell the truth of wrongdoings, then we cannot reconcile them as a nation, and therefore social injustices will continue replicating themselves. More recently, in an interview, Stevenson stated: “You can’t understand many of the most destructive issues or policies in our country without understanding our history of racial inequality... When you are allowed to demonize another community and call them savages, and treat them brutally and cruelly, it changes your psyche. We abused and mistreated the communities and cultures that existed on this land before Europeans arrived, and then that narrative of racial difference was used to develop slavery.”

What Skills Do We Need?

In addition to this historical perspective and systemic awareness, we also need skills such as: cultural competence, humility, critical consciousness, creativity, and robust racial and ethnic identity development. As Montessorians, we believe the path to peace and social change is through children; the idea that we pass on to them better values than we live ourselves. If we want our children to lead the way in peace, we need them to understand the truth of systemic oppression and injustice, and we need to build in them the skills they will need to be peacemakers.

This is not what we do now. Instead, we act in ways that are directly in opposition to what Montessori said about a just peace; we act as if the mere communal life of a classroom is peace education — as if grace and courtesy are peace education. In Montessori classrooms across this country, children are forced to suppress righteous anger about inequitable treatment because the conflict that anger generates is considered unpeaceful. It’s as if grace and courtesy are enough to undo accumulated oppressions; that if we can control the environment to mitigate the disturbances or outbursts, then we will have accomplished peace in our classroom. With deep critical consciousness and research on implicit bias, we can understand how pernicious and deeply systemic these problems are. We know that a peaceful classroom is not enough to transfer peacefulness and the skill of peacemaking to our children.



Keres Children's Learning Center, Elementary I

How Could This Look?

We need to make a hard turn on this — to actively reject this pedagogy of grace without justice as a pathway to peace. Here’s an example of what that can look like: Keres Children’s Learning Center (KCLC), the first Native American Language Immersion Montessori school, utilizes the Montessori pedagogy to revitalize and strengthen their language, which in return strengthens their values, beliefs, traditions, child rearing practices and effectively brings the community together in valuing their Indigenous Knowledge System and ways of life. In this community, Montessori is working in service to Cochiti Pueblo’s Keres language and culture. In the Cochiti community, there has always been a way of life based on harmony and love for one another and the natural world. Colonization and “schooling” disrupted these ways of being and weakened the language. Thus, when peace education is taught in Montessori schools, it is critical to acknowledge the truth that colonization disrupted what the Indigenous people knew as peace and systems of peacekeeping. In Montessori education, we must share peace education in the larger context of social justice.

How Do We Act On It?

Dr. Montessori talked about the transformation of self as the pathway to transformation of children. If we want to transmit something new to children about racial and social justice — from a facing-the-truth point of view and from a skills perspective — we’re going to need that truth and skills ourselves. Unfortunately, we as a Montessori community don’t have them now. There are a number of reasons for this — too few teachers of color, a deeply entrenched system of thinking about whiteness/privilege/oppression that clouds our vision and muddies our thinking, etc. At every turn, the Montessori community has done the best it knows how to do in the service of peace and children. But

we know more now, and we have to act on it.

Here's what it could look like to act on it:

(1) Social and racial justice training in every school and in every teacher training program:

- Embracing Equity Professional Development - <https://embracingequity.org/>
- Anti-bias, Anti-racist Montessori - <https://anti-biasmontessori.com/>

(2) Continuous education owned by every Montessorian for themselves:

- Join a cohort based learning program for self-directed learning on your own racial and ethnic identity development: Embracing Equity - <https://embracingequity.org/>
- Learn about equitable classroom management and preparing the environment with Listening and Learning: <https://www.listeningandlearning.org/>

(3) New materials and pedagogical ideas about developing racial identity in all children and building the skills needed to be peacemakers in our modern context:

- Racial and Ethnic Identity Development Research
- De-Centering Whiteness workshop at the Montessori for Social Justice Conference - <http://montessoriforsocialjustice.org/page/2/>

(4) Active support for programs like KCLC:

- Keres Children's Learning Center - <http://www.kclcmontessori.org/index.html>
- 3rd Annual Native Language Symposium - November 14-15, 2018 in Santa Fe, New Mexico

(5) Lots of opportunities for deep community dialogues (being mindful of who is at the table and who is not):

- AMI Conference Presentations and Workshops
- The AMI Diversity Forum (led by Daisy and Trisha in 2019)
- Montessori for Social Justice Conference - <http://montessoriforsocialjustice.org/page/2/>

When we clearly identify just peace, consciously build the necessary skills for justice, and take responsible individual and collective action, the future holds promise for liberation. We believe that Montessorians have the heart, the drive, and the will to move beyond peace education to social justice education.



References

Montessori, Maria. *Education and Peace*. Chicago: Regnery, 1972.

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