

# Equity, access, and curiosity

**How can Montessorians best engage with communities of color?**



BY **ANDREA JOHNSON**

*“That which you do for me, without me, is not for me.”*

We may think of this inspirational quote as a guiding mantra to remember as we assist our young students in the cultivation of independence. But did you know that this is also a powerful insight that can guide us in establishing a legacy of equity and access to Montessori education?

I live in a city of contrast—Charlotte, North Carolina—where “equity” and “access” are high frequency, haunting words. In 2014, Harvard researchers studied 50 of the largest U.S. cities in terms of upward mobility: one’s ability to climb out of poverty (“Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States,” in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*). The city of Charlotte ranked dead last (50th out of 50). This means that for a child born in poverty in Charlotte, it is harder to get out of poverty than in any other large city in the United States. Referred to as the Upward Mobility Study, it revealed that Charlotte is a city geographically divided by race and ethnicity, income inequality, family structure, social capital, and education. At the same time, we also made the U.S. News & World Report’s 2018 Best Places to Live in the United States, complete with the five

best suburbs to live.

We have four public Montessori schools here as well as ten private programs, each working very hard to serve our parents and families, despite the fact that we recognize the dismal reality that there are far too many children of color (in particular), who will never experience a Montessori education. If you asked any of us to define the terms of “equity” and “access”, you would most likely get varying definitions but a general agreement that equity in education is a goal everyone in education can get behind. Equity requires putting systems in place to ensure that every child has an equal chance for suc-

cess. That requires understanding the unique challenges and barriers faced by the individual students and communities that we serve and providing additional supports to help them overcome those barriers. This does not mean we will ensure equal outcomes but we all should strive to ensure that every child has equal opportunity for success.

diverse schools, developing executive functions, achieving academically, accessing early childhood education, culturally responsive education, and minimizing racially disproportionate discipline.

Leaving a legacy with students of color may be a struggle for public Montessori programs because of the lack of diversity of the teaching staff and the gentrification of public and charter school enrollment. In addition, it can be a challenge to communicate benefits to families of color who have may be suspicious of Montessori schools because they may feel that their child will have too much freedom and not be held

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In research published in the *Journal of Montessori Research*, Mira Debs and Katie Brown outlined several challenges facing public Montessori Schools in a 2017 paper, “Students of Color and Public Montessori Schools.” They explored the experiences of these students and found that our method offers both opportunities and limitations for students of color in attending

academically accountable. These perceptions may be due to distrust that we do not deliver an academically rigorous and culturally responsive education.

These are sturdy challenges that also provide opportunities. Building equity and access calls for adventurous problem solving and begins with recognizing our posture. How we come into the communities of color that we serve requires engagement. Access is a two-way street and the way we enter a conversation to understand the challenges and barriers of the marginalized is important. For the parents we serve, the neighborhoods we desire to root in, or for the staff member we are

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quite different from, it is essential that we sit and listen before moving in with our project, committee, new school, business or training plan. It is very disingenuous to attempt to address a problem that we are not curious about and that we haven't taken the time to understand.

In Charlotte, the center I work at is currently under threat of being pushed out because of gentrification. Our movement is grassroots and canvassing the community door to door to meet young moms has been interesting and challenging. I was angered recently to learn about the large developer that quietly acquired half of our community homes by purchasing them under the names of different LLCs. After they purchased those homes, they demolished them and built new ones and renamed half of the neighborhood. These homes then became available to majority race families and soon had a patrol walking through it at night. It was so angering! Caring for the welfare of our city and the dignity of the people

in my neighborhood required that I gather details from Ms. Sharelle, the president of the neighborhood association. I spent hours trying to analyze, dissect, and try to understand the issues surrounding this takeover. It took a lot of courage to wait for information when all I wanted to do was protest!

Equity is a balancing of the scales, which requires that we seek the welfare of the cities that we serve. For many people in our cities, they are balancing heavy loads of weight with forces of gravity that we may never know. What will be in our hearts as we attempt to access and engage them? Are we bound and determined? Concerned for our tasks? Coming to take? Enforce? Gain? Establish? We will find strength and promise when we access each other in dialogues with sensitivity, humility, and being curious about the challenges we face.

Montessori is a true gift and will impact needed communities with equity when we posture ourselves as invited partners, remembering, "That

which you do for me, without me, is not for me."

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