

# Hard questions for Montessori

**Cultivating equity requires facing some real challenges**



BY **ALLISON JONES**  
 AND **MAATI WAFFORD**

As we reflect on our early schooling and our current experience, instances of inequity and discrimination stand out. Montessori says: “A child does not understand injustice with his reason, but he senses that something is wrong and becomes depressed and deformed.”

One of us was a personal witness to these instances. Maati shares her story here:

*Early on, I noticed the way skin color, public housing, a single mother, and standing in the monthly line for milk, cheese, beans, canned meat, etc., shaped how adults thought of me, spoke to and over me, and looked through me, the questions they asked, and essentially what my teachers taught me. I very clearly remember wanting to prove them wrong. I wanted my teachers to see me, to see that special thing about me that perhaps only my family knew. I wished my teachers could just actually see me at school—wouldn't that be nice?*

*I'm a firm believer that the themes of our lives, both dark and uplifting, can lead us to our purpose. The challenging, most troubling moments can actually propel us towards our destinies. Now, I show*



*Facing Montessori challenges head on*

*up each day as an advocate in my school. I am strongest with students who struggle to find their voices, with young girls who come to school with self-doubt and low self-esteem because of what the world tells them about their worth and value. I am most effective with students who are terrified of math, who have visceral responses when the teacher calls on them to speak. I champion the children who will bomb any test you put in front of them because their academic confidence is so low—and the stakes always seem so high—and it is further confirmed when that test determines your reading group, which stigmatizes in numerous other ways.*

*I know these things about myself and I continue to pull back the layers of my personal narrative because I am committed to reflective practice and to Montessori philosophy.*

Recently, with their *Montessori*

*Assessment Playbook*, the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector has created structures and tools that honor not only the whole child, but the whole adult, the whole administrator, and the whole community. The wide-scope approach to assessments is critical to the future of public Montessori.

In Chapter 6 of the *Playbook*, a critique of standardized testing discusses Lewis Terman's influence on standardized testing as a pernicious “social sorting” tool. In fact, Terman's work was fueled by explicit racism. From his 1916 book, *The Measurement of Intelligence*:

*“Black and other ethnic minority children are uneducable beyond the nearest rudiments of training. No amount of school instruction will ever make them capable citizens. Their dullness seems to be racial.”*

*continues >*

*“Children of this group should be segregated into special classes and given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master abstraction, but they can make efficient workers.”*

*“There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their prolific breeding.”*

What in our history allowed this story to exist? How are perspectives like these perpetuated today? What allows these ideas to continue in our Montessori environments? What do we have to actually dismantle in order to counter biases that permeate our schools and the hearts and minds of educators and children? Montessori educators and administrators alike

## Equity in Montessori assessment

Academic equity is a loaded term, even (especially?) in a Montessori environment. Equity is at the root of Montessori. The method itself was born through work with children with special needs, and refined by responding to the needs of children in a low income housing project. Individualization and differentiation are intrinsic to the method. It would be easy to say that Montessori is, by its nature, education for peace, and so by practicing the pedagogy, we are inherently practicing equity, but the reality is much more complicated.

Now, one hundred years after Montessori founded her first school in Rome, we are attempting to deliver high-quality Montessori education to children of diverse educational, cultural, and economic backgrounds, some of whom have had interrupted

of who they are. However, in a world where performance on tests determines entry into college and possibly professional success, it would be a disservice to our students, especially our low-income students and students of color, to poorly prepare them for that reality and to fail to teach them how to show their skills in the way that will be required of them. As we grapple with how to meet that need without sacrificing the Montessori philosophy, there are three main areas to question: the assessments, ourselves, and Montessori itself.

## Question assessments

It is important to really understand that the problem of bias is multifaceted and continues to impact how we approach Montessori assessments and data collection broadly. There are several weighty questions that we must explore openly and answer truthfully.

**Content:** What decisions are made about the content of our assessments, and who is making them?

**Standardization:** What decisions are being made about the population for whom the test is appropriate?

**Test administration:** Are administrators familiar with the patterns of language, behavior, and customs of students being examined?

**Validation:** Are the tests accomplishing what they were designed to accomplish?

“Standardized” tests require all test takers to answer the same questions (or a selection of questions from a common bank), under the same conditions. Tests must then be scored in a “standard” or consistent manner. Ideally, this makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students across schools, districts, and states. Is this an even realistic aim? Understanding when and for whom this type of test is best suited is extremely tricky, especially when the children are from

## Do our children need to leave their “home selves” at home, or is that part of them welcomed and celebrated in the classroom?

must be in dialogue about assessments while unpacking the inner work that we must commit to in order to even have productive conversations regarding what to do about assessments and data. NCMPS has begun this work and is creating philosophy-centered support systems. But questions remain: Who are the people that will actually use these tools? How have they been prepared? What people are finding the most success in their proper implementation?

education, and many of whom did not start with us at age three. We live in a country where our schools are judged by children’s performance on standardized tests, not by their ability to concentrate and follow their interests. What does academic equity even mean in this context? Does it mean every student reaching grade level? Every student achieving growth? Every student being given the skills needed for self-determination? Some combination of the above?

Standardized assessments do not give us a full picture of students’ abilities, and definitely are not a descriptor

a different culture than the test makers. What actually is standard, and who determines what exists within such a category?

Assessments that reflect a child's lived experiences and take into account their cultural perspectives and worldview are critical to getting a true sense of not only what the child knows but the various ways in which that knowing manifests in the world. The distinction here is finding the what while honoring the wide range of the *hows*. In many cases, students of diverse cultures and languages are being required to step outside of themselves in order to be successful on a test. As a consequence many students may simply choose not to learn. Teachers or assessment measures that do not respect children's own integrity and culture can cause a major loss of self. We have to intentionally look with a critical lens at test content. Language and framing matter, and the environment we build matters as well. All students need to see themselves reflected in the environment, need to feel at home in the environment. We know that real learning is impossible if children do not feel safe and loved.

## Question ourselves

Given assessments that may be inherently biased in their design, it is even more important that we examine our own interactions with the students who need us the most, and our framing of the work that we have taken on. Culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings insists that "a focus on the [achievement] gap is misplaced. Instead, we need to look at the 'education debt' that has accumulated over time. This debt comprises historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components." She similarly suggests that we discard the term "at risk," pointing out that students who have been "saddled with" this label since their first day of school cannot reasonably be expected to "proudly wear it" and succeed.

## Question Montessori

Montessori is a philosophy, and in order to best serve our students, we need to question how we implement it. Montessori education can be defined as support for adaptation to the world. Primary students adapt to the physical world, and elementary students adapt to the sociocultural world. We are very proud of the "window into the world" our curriculum offers to the students. While this is truly valuable, we must also question what world we are asking our children to adapt to. Often, it is a white-normative, Christian-normative, heteronormative, majority culture version of the world. Do all of our children feel valued in classrooms that don't necessarily reflect their home culture? Do our children need to leave their "home selves" at home, or is that part of them welcomed and celebrated in the classroom? Are children able to connect what they are learning to their greater life experiences? How do microaggressions and institutionalized bias affect their experience?

## Equity beyond assessment

Even if all of our students do feel valued, represented, and safe within their classrooms, there are still many difficult implementation questions that we must grapple with. How do we support students who are new to Montessori and "behind?" What does Montessori look like for diverse learners? How do we build academic skills and executive functioning simultaneously? The "short game" for schools is to make sure that their students pass the tests so that they can stay open and continue to do the work. However, the long game is digging into the Montessori philosophy to determine how to face these new challenges without compromising the pedagogy. It means things like adapting the primary curriculum so that new five-year-olds can develop at least some academic skills and executive functioning abilities. It means

focusing on push-in for interventions and special education services so that work can continue in the general education environment. It means teaching the skills of 20-year teachers, such as the skilled management of follow-up work in elementary, to new teachers, so that students can maximally benefit from the curriculum. It means learning about trauma-informed care, and reaching out to our students' communities, so that we can meet them where they are, instead of expecting them to come to where we are.

This is big work. This is likely to be a work in progress for a long time. But when all of our students are learning, valued, and well-served in their classrooms, we can truly call our pedagogy education for equity, justice, and peace.

---

*Allison Jones, MEd, is Child Study lead at Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School, in Washington, D.C. She holds AMI Primary and Elementary diplomas.*

*Maati Wafford, MSW, holds AMS Early Childhood, Lower Elementary, and Administration credentials from the Institute for Advanced Montessori Studies.*

## MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

**NATIONAL CENTER for  
MONTESSORI in the  
PUBLIC SECTOR**

Subscribe at [montessoripublic.org](http://montessoripublic.org)

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2019 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector