

Equity conversations in Montessori

Reflections from two Black Montessori leaders



BY **MAATI WAFFORD**
AND **JASMINE WILLIAMS**

Equity conversations and real work are happening throughout the Montessori movement (*Equity news in the Montessori movement*, MontessoriPublic Fall 2020). Maati Wafford was formerly Race and Equity Advisor for NCMPS and is now Director of Anti-Bias, Anti-racist Education for AMS. Jasmine Williams has taken over Wafford's role as well as serving as a Montessori Teacher Residency Instructor and Coach for NCMPS. They sat down (virtually!) over the winter break to reflect on the work that's happening in the movement.

Our work in our respective organizations

Jasmine Williams: I am new to race and equity work on this scale and sometimes that feels daunting. Transitioning into this role with NCMPS carries huge responsibility. However, my growing association of Montessorians who have dedicated themselves to education for social justice reminded me that they all started in a similar position at some point.

My predecessor, mentor, friend and sister, Maati Wafford, laid down powerful transformative roots with educators as well as the organization of NCMPS. I've had conversations with Betsy Romero and Steve Mejia-Menendez of

Lee Montessori Public Charter School, Amelia Allen Sherwood of Elm City Montessori, Trisha Moquino of Keres Children's Learning Center, Sakeenah Franzen of Denver Montessori Jr/Sr High School, Allison Jones of Breakthrough Montessori, Iana Phillips of Seward Montessori and Marta Donahoe.

A throughline in these conversations for me has been the concept of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is a Zulu term meaning humanity. As a philosophy, *ubuntu* means "I am because we are." I have grown to understand and love *ubuntu* in these conversations because none of us can do this work alone and we didn't arrive at these phases of our lives and work alone.

What does "true" equity work look like in your role and space at your organization?

JW: I think NCMPS is in a special place right now. Maati's work with the Center laid a healthy foundation where employees and the Board are working towards equity being at the core of our work. Being the person who has now come into the role she left definitely takes shape in seeing previous work through and having compassionate accountability for myself and others in and out of the organization in living that out.

One way I would like to realize this is with our Montessori Teacher Residency (MTR) program. Montessori teacher education programs (TEPs) have been well-intentioned for decades. However, those good intentions haven't placed the Montessori community (including all stakeholders) in a better position of actualizing diversity, equity, and inclusion in proactive ways.

The occasional add-on of equity content hours has the potential to do more harm than good.

Awareness and action for equity is a spectrum of growth and progress which should mean constantly educating oneself and the cohorts one teaches in order to bring about liberation for Montessori communities. Incorporating critical theories such as critical disability studies or critical race theory and its many offshoots in an MTR or a TEP creates space for this. Again, this isn't meant as a supplement or a complement. It should have equal time, effort and attention as the Montessori pedagogy itself.

Power is always an obstacle. I view it as an obstacle because people with power keep a tight grip on it or feel threatened when it seems like control will be taken away. This power struggle can show up just as much for people of the global majority as much as it does with white/white presenting people because we have been socialized to perpetrate these behaviors. In education, this serves as the antithesis of service, justice, peace and liberation.

Toward the end of 2020, I attended a virtual training with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond which focused a lot on socialization and power analyses. Our socialization feeds structures and institutions that hold power. The more we, NCMPS, work towards personal and professional ABAR lifestyles, I believe we have the potential to influence other organizations, schools and communities to also work towards dismantling power structures.

NCMPS continues to move into brave spaces reanalyzing tools, literature, coaching, residency instruction, and courses. Our Board and staff are

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currently working with Embracing Equity as a starting point. We are crafting an equity page stating who we are with equity in action and what we are working towards.

I hope this page is also seen as an inward and outward form of accountability where our partners feel we have fostered a space to be honest—where

On deeper levels, we also design systems that offer rewards and accolades to individuals who are most skilled at playing their role and for research, social media posts, music, products, businesses, etc. that have the most success in promoting these subtle messages to society as a whole.

Our work lies in stopping this cycle

culture, of personal narratives and the erasure of people.

It's our responsibility to choose every day where we stand. We don't get to attend a conference workshop and then say, "I got it. I'm now an ally. I'm now an ABAR educator." We don't get to participate in training and say, "I got it. I am a culturally responsive or culturally competent researcher." It's not something that we can just proclaim. We can't simply speak justice and liberation into existence. It's something that we live, that lives through us and it's a choice that we have to consciously make every single day.

Awareness and action for equity is a spectrum of growth and progress ... to bring about liberation

we are not just talking the talk, and that they see that we always have the head and heart posture to be open to that feedback.

Maati Wafford: From my perspective and based on my personal experiences with racism and bias, I would say that the most critical impediments to this work lie in our individual and collective lack of understanding of the ways in which we are all negatively impacted by white supremacy culture.

There are varied and particularly nuanced ways through which this culture is designed to infiltrate our minds and hearts. We have all been socialized to either prop up inequity or to be squashed by it. We gain experiences and practice in acting these roles out any time we participate in our health care system, the justice system, our educational systems, etc. We then turn around and socialize children to either be oppressors or to play the role of the oppressed.

in its tracks.

On some level, we all have a skewed sense of reality and our true nature as liberated human beings. Herein lies the point of anti-bias anti-racist work, and I want to be very clear, this work is needed and valid whether you label it ABAR or not. In my role, I am constantly asking myself how can we ground ourselves at a spirit level in this work and take that level of clarity, truth and justice out into everything that we do?

The more we can work collectively to create spaces for this level of liberated living the more success we will have in seeing the reality of the situations that we're in. This is where it becomes so important that we consider our socio-political contexts through an intentional lens of critical consciousness and justice.

As Montessori educators and leaders we all have the power and ability to liberate and at the same time—the ability to cause repression, perpetuate harm and be complicit in the erasure of

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