

1. The author on her first day of Montessori school

2. The author and her sister in an apple tree

3. The author and her schoolmates in David Douthwright's classroom, learning about Easter and Passover

4. The author, dressed as Maria Montessori, speaks with two students at a Middle School peace summit.

5. On a global service trip to Ecuador, the author and Upper Elementary and Middle School students helped a small community build a shelter for the local women's micro-economy.

6. The finished shelter

Derrick Gay works with Upper Elementary students at the Montessori School of Denver, Denver, CO.



UNPACKING “DIVERSITY” IN OUR LIVES AND SCHOOLS:

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. DERRICK GAY

By Dane L. Peters, MA

Dr. Derrick Gay is an internationally recognized expert on diversity, inclusion, and global citizenship, who consults with organizations around the world. I first met him in October 2012, when I was head of school at Brooklyn Heights Montessori School, and our professional development committee invited him to present to students, faculty, and parents; he returned to the school again in January 2013 to give a talk to faculty and staff. In fall 2017, he engaged the AMS Board of Directors in a full day of professional development, work that will continue at the board’s spring 2019 meeting. Gay has also worked with many Montessori schools throughout the country. In addition to his expertise, his affable, thoughtful personality serves as an inviting entrée into the complex world of human interactions. Here is Derrick Gay...

DANE PETERS: Could you begin by telling our readers a bit about your background—where you grew up, and how you found your way to such a strong commitment to diversity and global equity? And how it happened that you are fluent in English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese (with studies in Latin, Korean, and German), and, as well, became an opera singer?

DERRICK GAY: I was born in a “small town” called Chicago, and I attended public schools. I began taking French in seventh grade with a wonderful teacher at Whitney Young School, in Chicago. Whitney Young was the city’s first public magnet school, founded in 1975. Chicago wanted to create a school with strong academic, arts, and athletic programs that would serve as a magnet to bring the best talent from around the city. The founders were intentional about the school being racially and socioeconomically diverse. Many people thought this was a crazy idea, because the school was in an area that had been completely decimated by the riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968.

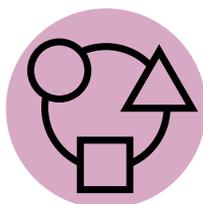
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Whitney Young served students from all backgrounds and had an inclusion component that served students with both physical and mental disabilities. I fostered great friendships with people from many different backgrounds, and Whitney Young is really where my language studies began. There were students in the school who were native French speakers. I had already been exposed to Spanish at home and in the neighborhood, but I took Spanish in school as well. I loved opera and music, so music also became an avenue for me to deepen my language study.

After high school, I attended Oberlin College and Conservatory. I majored in Romance languages in the college, and in the Conservatory I majored in opera performance. As an opera student, I was required to study Italian, French, German, and English, in addition to studying diction in these languages. For someone who loved music and loved people and cultures, these two majors were perfect. Oberlin was also the perfect school because of its sustained commitment to the ideas of social justice, equity, and inclusion, long before these terms were part of public consciousness. Oberlin was the first college to admit women, African-Americans, and always was at the center of LGBTQ advocacy. It has always been a school at the forefront of equal civil rights for all. Even though I was exposed to these ideas at college, I never considered DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) work as a vocation.

Eventually, it was my introduction into independent schools that really set me on the path toward this work. I began full-time teaching at a wonderful Quaker school. I was attracted to its philosophy and appreciation for progressive social issues, and the notion that each of us has an inner light. I was placed on the school’s diversity committee. At first, I was somewhat taken aback and wondered what specific insight I might have to offer the committee. I was not even sure what diversity meant or how it was different from inclusion, equality, and equity. I secretly wondered if I was placed on the committee because people perceived me as “diverse.” But once I immersed myself in the community and the committee, I very much wanted to explore these issues more. I also learned that many schools were very much committed to diversity and inclusion, AND that the word *diversity* itself was resonating in really different ways with people, ranging from affirmation and agency to exclusion, blame, and shame. The big elephant in the room was not everyone feels included by “diversity.”

DP: That’s a perfect segue into my next question. Could you define the terms *diverse*, *diversity*, *inclusion*, *equality*, and *social justice*?



DIVERSITY
You can sort people in myriad ways, but diversity is 100% neutral.



INCLUSION
How does one measure inclusion? Ask people, but in an anonymous survey.

DG: This is a critical question. For *diversity*, I look at the root of the word, the etymology, which means “different” or “a divergent perspective.” It’s critical to note, however, that no one group represents the “diverse” group. Diversity is not a euphemism for “people of color” or other historically marginalized groups. Diversity really just means human variation. Those differences can be sliced along different metrics. It could represent differences among professions, among grade levels, among gender. . . or race, religion, sexual orientation, political ideology, age, height, etc. You can sort people in myriad different ways, but diversity is 100% neutral. It is simply a way of quantifying differences. When we say “diversity,” it should not represent a shorthand or a proxy for historically marginalized groups, often through a racial lens. For example, a school may report being 37% diverse, and you are meant to understand that this really means 37% people of color, or 37% black people, or 37% Latino. This framing of diversity does not resonate with the entire community and often feels like contradicting messages. We can’t say that we are 37% diverse AND expect 100% of the community to feel that they can participate in and benefit from diversity efforts. Moving forward, it is important that we re-frame diversity in our schools.

As for *inclusion*, many educators find this concept the most elusive to define and measure. How does one measure inclusion? Ask people, but in an anonymous survey, recognizing that there are potential power differentials among individuals, or people’s relationships with other people are at stake, or people may perceive that their financial aid may be at stake. Another method is to have a focus group facilitated by an external person, asking individuals to share their sense of belonging and growth areas.

Continuing with terms, there is *equality*, which, simply put, is giving everyone the same thing, irrespective of what they need to flourish. Equality often seems like the most appropriate strategy. Certainly, if you give everyone the same thing and assume there is a level playing field, then everyone should have equal access and equal opportunity to flourish. Unfortunately, equality is not an effective strategy, given that society does not represent an even playing field, and students have different needs in order to flourish.

Equity, then, is a strategy toward achieving equal outcomes. This raises an interesting question with regard to Montessori, where the idea of differentiating support based on the individual needs of a student is inherent in the philosophy. As a Montessorian, consider the individual relationships that you develop in the classroom and how Montessori classrooms are very student-centered. This is a form of differentiation.

This is equity. You do not provide the same supports for all students or force students to learn in a particular manner. However, as it relates to thinking about the social sphere, differentiation becomes less apparent, largely because we are not always aware of how people feel included. That awareness is informed by our understanding of our own inclusion and/or our understandings of recognizing differences as different, or as taboos, particularly within the framework of color-blind ideology.

Social justice is an interesting term, and individuals have varying understandings of this construct. First, it is not universally understood as beneficial to all, because often people understand social justice within a framework of limited resources, or as a zero-sum game. If I recognize that some have more than others and that we live in a world that has systemic privileges, and the reason that some have more than others is not only because they have worked harder than others or that others have not worked hard enough, then, for many, social justice suggests a redistribution of resources in a way that implies taking things away from those that have and giving resources to others who have not worked hard enough to earn them (meritocracy). I think it is important to reframe social justice as well.

When I think of social justice, I think of intentional strategies to create a society where everyone feels affirmed, valued, and safe—mentally, physically, and psychologically. A world where who you are should not inform your ability to have access to what you need to thrive. In the end, it means that whether I am born into a family that has lots of material possessions or very few, whether my neighborhood is rich or poor, whether I worship a certain deity or do not worship at all (and so on), none of that should impact my ability to access basic goods that I need to survive and/or to realize my full potential.

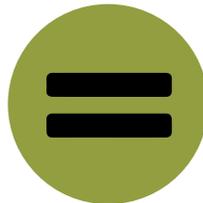
Language around this work is fluid and ever-changing, because society is fluid and ever-changing. I think there is one more term people should know. We mentioned diversity, inclusion, equality, equity, and social justice. The one other term that people should be familiar with is **cultural competency**, because it frames the ability to navigate differences with respect.

Cultural competency comprises two primary components: first is cultivating self-awareness and acknowledging that we are good people *and* that we have cultural and identity blind spots. The second piece is reflecting on our understanding around our notions of difference and how we perceive people who are different from us.

I would add that it is important for schools to articulate the value proposition of this work—to articulate

the *why*. We all need the ability to see ourselves and others in ways that allow everyone to flourish. In a globalized and multicultural world, the ability to navigate

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EQUITY
Equity aims to achieve equal outcomes, rather than equality, which is giving everyone the same thing, irrespective of what they need to flourish.

differences is critical to success in school, work, and around thoughtful and informed citizenship. Moreover, the school's objectives must be clearly articulated in a way that aligns with the mission of the school. Otherwise, this work will be viewed as fluffy kumbaya noise or as efforts that are discrete from the real business of schools. Finally, this work must be aligned with the values of the school and the value proposition of why parents choose your school.

Most parents choose Montessori for some variation of the same reasons: the value of relationships, the student-centered nature of Montessori, and the fact that their child will be known, valued, and affirmed. Aligning this work for Montessori is really about making the implicit explicit.

DP: From your experience, can you speak to specific strengths, challenges, and blind spots in Montessori schools?

DG: The strength, certainly, is that there is a strong sense of mission across Montessori schools that is informed by the Montessori philosophy, which promotes a strong sense of school community and collaboration. The philosophy also promotes differentiation of learning and empowering student-centered learning and voice. This approach resonates with parents, particularly parents and families who have elected to join a Montessori school. It is always an intentional decision; you don't "end up" at a Montessori school. So, you have this self-selection of the type of parents and educators who join a Montessori school. They do not want cookie-cutter standardization of "all children learn the same way or a here-are-the-outcomes for every child." You get a strong sense of relationships and an innate sense that in order to be an effective educator, there must be a relationship with each and every

student and each and every person in the community. This is something that you feel when you walk into a Montessori environment. Be it a classroom or a conference, there is shared language, shared framework around the philosophy, and saliency of relationships in the learning process. It is indisputable, which is why folks are attracted to the Montessori philosophy.

In many ways, the strong important relationships that Montessori educators tend to have with students represent a challenge and double-edged sword. I understand two challenges: one, there is much at stake around the acknowledgment that in this strong, tight-knit, thoughtful community, there still exist ways that individuals may not feel included. Secondly, sometimes there is cognitive dissonance in reconciling this first idea. I have found that many people often feel that in Montessori schools, the ideology serves as a panacea or strategy around this work. While they fully acknowledge that we live in a world where there are challenges around folks feeling fully included, they feel that, somehow, when you walk into a Montessori school, that ideology, that philosophy, and that pedagogical orientation will mitigate or eliminate feelings of exclusion.

DP: What advice would you give to Montessori educators and parents to incorporate inclusion in their school environments?

DG: First, align inclusion work with the mission and the philosophy of the Montessorian/school. Not intentionally engaging in inclusion work is not living up to the mission to which you subscribed. Right? There is almost an extra incentive for the Montessori school to be engaged in this work.

Second, while the school, the philosophy, and the ways in which the Montessorian teaches and learns in

Curate strategies, models, and best practices that are already out there and personalize them in a Montessori way.

a community are in many ways unique relative to other schools, there is also the macro context that needs to be considered—that you are a part of and connected to the rest of the world. So, things that are happening in the rest of the world are also going to impact you, and that becomes an opportunity. You do not have to reinvent the wheel. Curate strategies, models, and best



SOCIAL JUSTICE

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practices that are already out there and personalize them in a Montessori way. Additionally, incorporate this mindset into the ongoing education of students, faculty, and staff, in professional development and parent education, in ways that become ingrained in the DNA of the school.

DP: I loved the TEDx Talk (2014) you gave on diversity as a double-edged sword. How much of a role does class and white privilege play in diversity and bias?

DG: I would broaden the question. If we reframe diversity as representative of many differences, the crux of this question is thinking about the ways in which privilege broadly informs DEI work. There are two compelling definitions that continue to resonate with me around privilege. One is, if you do not have to think about it, it probably is a privilege, and the second is, if you have always been privileged, equity may feel like oppression. These framings helped me in thinking about identifying in my own life where I have privilege and where I have not had to consider certain perspectives.

To directly answer your question, a large part of this diversity work centers around identifying and acknowledging where in your life you are operating in privilege—and we all have different forms of privilege. Next, recognize that you are a good person, but you have blind spots, and you must have the willingness to engage in those blind spots. Finally, even if you can understand your blind spots on an intellectual level, you must be willing to incorporate those insights into how you move forward with behaviors, actions, and attitudes in ways that align with your goals around creating a more inclusive society.

DP: Can we move toward seeing people as human beings rather than individual lives in different categories—religion, race, gender, class, or political entities? How can we get people to look at each other as human beings?

DG: That is a great question. I was listening to a TED Talk, two months ago, where a woman shared a really interesting story about being born in Korea; her family immigrated to Argentina, eventually moving to the United States. In the United States, she was often challenged because her primary language, the language in which she was educated and that is most accessible to her, is Spanish—yet she is Korean. She looks Korean, and folks are surprised when they hear her open her mouth. They are also surprised that there is a fairly

significant Korean population in Argentina. She felt as if sometimes she was being put in a particular box because someone had a particular understanding of one of her identities, and that she felt it was limiting.

She asked herself this same question: Why can't we all just be humans, and why are we putting each other in these label/identity boxes? She struggled with this but ultimately concluded that there is actually great benefit from these identity boxes, meaning that the goal is that we are all humans, and we want to see each other as human beings. We also know that the way we navigate the world, the ways in which people see us, and the ways in which we have access to different networks that impact our lives, are often informed by these identity boxes.

She thought there was a positive end here, and I appreciated this. That, in fact, thinking that I am a human, and I am composed of hundreds of different identities, that increases exponentially the ways in which I can connect with people. I am not just Korean; I am not just Argentine; I am not just a Spanish speaker; and I am not just a woman. I am all of these things, which means that I can connect with Koreans, Argentines, people who speak Spanish, women, and many other people, in meaningful ways.

Another important insight was highlighting this notion of the many ways in which I see myself and identify. I can also then, in really meaningful and diagnostic ways, begin to think about what my blind spots are around connecting with other people. If I just see myself as only a human being, then I would not be able to discern specific ways that I am not connecting with people, and I may be unintentionally creating a space where other people feel as if they cannot belong. I thought it was a brilliant way of thinking about this. I think that seeing people as humans is everyone's goal, but seeing each other as only human really does not allow us to do some of the type of work that we need—particularly in a pluralistic society—to create an inclusive space.

DP: How do you help people deal with the current state of government and politics as it affects global diversity and diversity in our country? And you don't have to get into the politics of it all, but how do we help educators, parents, and children understand the rhetoric?

DG: I have to say that, in the last decade or so, this has become increasingly complex, given the polarization of politics, not only in the United States but globally as well.

Working in schools around the country and around the world, I try to reframe the conversation from being about partisan issues; instead, I try to get people

to think about shared values—the mission of the school and ways in which political rhetoric, wherever it is coming from, aligns or does not align with values around humanity, empathy, trust, friendship, and inclusion. I encourage people to use their family's or school's values as a litmus test and not to succumb to political labels coming from a particular individual or a particular party.

I encourage people to use their family's or school's values as a litmus test and not to succumb to political labels coming from a particular individual or a particular party.

In many ways, what schools have always done has become politicized, but I have counseled schools and families to do what they have always been doing around their values. So, if the value of your school has been that you welcome all people, irrespective of nationality and religion, for example, and there is a law or policy that is incongruent with this value, then your school sticks to the mission of the school. I have found this framing effective in Tennessee, New Hampshire, California, Illinois—wherever it is, and folks have been able to get outside of labels and think about content, substance, implications of actions, policies, and laws. Also, it's important to cultivate in students at a very young age an ability around discernment and deconstructing messages, so they can identify the essence of the messages that they consume. So, at very young ages, they are using their own student empowerment, their own voices, to translate and understand messages, questioning if they align with their values as individuals. This goes especially for political messages that they are seeing on social media. This work should begin at a very young age, when students have a very strong sense of fairness and of what is right and wrong.

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**CULTURAL
COMPETENCY**
This frames
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differences
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Reference

TEDx Spence School. (2014). *The double-edged sword*. [Video file]. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=63&v=qQ3iaf0omoY.

Editors' note:

More of Derrick Gay's videos and talks can be found at derrickgay.com/videos and derrickgay.com/podcasts.

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