



EXPLORING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN MONTESSORI (PART 3)

By Tammy Oesting and Ashley Speed

INTRODUCTION

In this third article in our series exploring diversity and inclusivity in Montessori, we build upon our previous treatises on why this work is imperative and how identity formation sets the stage for supporting the nuances of diversity. Our work as Montessorians necessitates that we, the adults, be willing to lean into our own transformation by hearing the personal truths of diverse voices from our community and beyond. This ability and willingness to learn from and relate respectfully to people from both our own culture and other cultures defines the term *cultural relevancy* and provides a starting point for educators to begin (or continue) to minimize their harm and dismantle systemic oppression. In this article, we are pleased to amplify the voices of our esteemed colleagues Trisha Moquino, of Keres Children's Learning Center, in Cochiti Pueblo, NM, and Johnny Boucher, of Eduarto Mata Montessori School, in Dallas, TX.

sori Association. Her master's thesis laid out the vision for what would eventually become KCLC. Contact Trisha at trisha@kclcmontessori.org.

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Dr. Montessori reminds us all to engage in the spiritual preparation of ourselves as guides/teachers. Culturally Relevant Education (CRE) cannot be achieved unless we as guides are prepared to examine the social contradictions in and outside of our Montessori environments and reflect on the ways in which Montessorians perpetuate social inequities, bias, and white supremacy in our delivery of the Montessori pedagogy.

"I wrote these words for everyone who struggles in their youth/Who won't accept deception, instead of what is truth." These lyrics, from the song "Everything Is Everything" by hip-hop philosopher Lauryn Hill, continue to be an inspiration to me. In 2006, I refused to accept the ways in which public schools

CULTIVATING CULTURAL RELEVANCY: A FOCUS ON TEACHER TRANSFORMATION

Trisha Moquino is the co-founder/education director/guide at Keres Children's Learning Center (KCLC), which serves Cochiti Pueblo, an indigenous community in New Mexico. She is from the tribal communities of Cochiti, Kewa, and Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, in New Mexico. Trisha completed her Montessori Elementary I certification at the Montessori Education Center of the Rockies and her Primary training with United Montes-

were educating our children. Lerone Bennett, Jr., an African-American historian (1928–2018), said: “An educator in a system of oppression is either a revolutionary or an oppressor” (Hale, 1978, p. 7). I chose to be on the side of revolutionary educators.

I recognized early on that I could no longer perpetuate a system of deception as a public school teacher. Witnessing many of our children who were still fluent in our indigenous language of Keres not be supported in their language was oppressive. And furthermore, knowing that my own daughter’s Keres fluency would not be supported in public school was the final prick to

to use our Keres language as the medium of instruction in our future school.

At KCLC, Gloria Ladson-Billing’s work on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is essential. CRP allows children to naturally develop cultural competency, achieve academically, and challenge existing social inequities. The whole Pueblo child is built up through an environment my colleague Mario Benabe (2018) described as including “teachers who lead understanding cultural knowledge beyond the confines of the Montessori philosophy, materials and their scope and sequence [Math, geography, Language, Sensorial, Practical Life, etc.] and how they communicate this linguistically/culturally with and to children.” KCLC seeks to develop Keres-speaking, community-minded children. Our Keres language holds our worldview, values, beliefs, culture, and ultimately our truth. In laying the foundation for the school, we have used our traditional cultural belief that all children come to us with a gift and we must help to nurture their gifts using the strengths of our community, inclusive of our Keres language.

At the 2018 Montessori for Social Justice Conference, Roberto and Lorena Germán reminded us of the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) that “seeks to perpetuate and foster-to-sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation. CSP exists wherever education sustains the lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through school” (Alim, Paris, 2017).

Keres Children’s Learning Center is a manifestation of culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies and even more—the “even more” being the natural ways in which our traditional cultural beliefs are environmentally, culturally, and linguistically integrated to serve the “whole Pueblo child.”

In implementing CRP in our Montessori classrooms, we are representing the lived experiences of people of color in some of Montessori’s most basic lessons. As an example, in our Dual Language (Keres/English) Elementary I classroom, we have pictures and writeups of artists from Cochiti instead of the white authors traditionally represented in Montessori settings. When a

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my consciousness; it would no longer allow me to be a public school teacher. Every aspect of public school was and continues to be about English reading, writing, and math, which silently sends a message to indigenous children (and their communities) that their languages and cultures are not good enough, and the public school exists to “educate” them. In no way does the public school system build on the strengths of the children they are educating. Ultimately, I was no longer willing to teach in such a deficit-based model of education. Thus, I set out on a journey to create an educational model, Keres Children’s Learning Center (KCLC), that would honor the “whole Pueblo child” and our Keres language in an immersion Montessori setting. And so, along with our KCLC Board of Directors, we asked the Pueblo de Cochiti Tribal Council if we could open KCLC, as we needed their permission



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child begins learning the names of states and nations in the Americas, we remind them of indigenous names and peoples who were displaced by white settlers. In our Primary Immersion classroom, in addition to the traditional Montessori Bells for music, we have a drum and appropriate attire for children to dance in, according to the season. At KCLC, we integrate a culturally relevant yearlong focus into the Montessori curriculum. This year, our teachers are giving lessons based on the essential question, “How are our local and celebrated animals important to Cochiti people?”

Education for all children should truly prepare all children for their whole life and be relevant to where they come from and inclusive of their languages. My own daughter’s fluency in Keres helped to inspire Keres Children’s Learning Center. I wanted an education that would allow her to continue to speak her Keres language, instead of taking it from her. Today, education continues to be a subtractive one for many children of the global majority. With a culturally relevant/culturally sustaining approach, it does not have to be that way.

“It seems we lose the game before we even start to play.” Another line in Lauryn Hill’s song speaks truth to the systemic oppression faced by children of marginalized communities every day. The way to ensure our brown and black children win the game of life is to ensure their educational experience is one of sustained addition rather than subtraction. At KCLC, we have done this through creating a Montessori environment that implements sustainable cultural relevance.

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QUESTIONS FOR JOHNNY BOUCHER

Jeannot Rene Jonte (“Johnny”) Boucher is a 3–6 guide at Eduardo Mata Montessori, in the Dallas Independent School District, and an award-winning Distinguished Teaching Ambassador, who helps teachers prepare exemplary classrooms. Johnny is 3–6-credentialed (AMI), holds a Master of Education degree with dual emphasis in Montessori and Early Literacy, and is a doctoral candidate in Urban Leadership at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education. He is a transgender nonbinary person (he/him or they/them pronouns) and parent

With vulnerable listening and challenging reflection, we see that cultural relevancy can absolutely be a part of the Montessori doctrine of peace.

to both a transgender child and a gender-creative child. Johnny serves on the board of Hope Day School, the first LGBT-led and -affirming early development school in Dallas. Contact Johnny at jonteboucher@jhu.edu.

TAMMY & ASHLEY: What do you think cultural relevancy looks like in Montessori schools?

JOHNNY: Cultural relevancy means, first of all, that we can relate respectfully to learners from many backgrounds and cultures. It is easy for those of us in Montessori environments to implement cultural relevancy, as the foundation of respect should already be present. However, there are less obvious elements of cultural relevance requiring specific training for the adult. We all have unconscious biases that are part of our cultures that we must overcome. In preparing our environments to aid our students in overcoming the systemic oppressions they

will face, we apply Dr. Montessori's definition of the Prepared Adult to our particular place and time.

TAMMY & ASHLEY: Why is our doctrine of peace not enough?

JOHNNY: To put it in Montessori language, the doctrine of peace is our indirect aim. Yet our direct aim, in the context of today, is that our students need language for how to respond when they hear racial slurs or ableist terms. If we fail to provide that language, then what is the absorbent mind taking in? Which children are pushed to the margins?

Without our guidance, how will children know that it is not just war that is antithetical to peace but also oppression, discrimination, and neglect? We have an obligation to make these very abstract ideas concrete in a way that the young child can explore.

TAMMY & ASHLEY: What practical advice would you give Montessori educators that are looking to become more culturally relevant in their practice?

JOHNNY: First, the educator must think deeply about the power structures at work in the child's context. What oppressive messages are already present in the culture that we must work to deconstruct?

I think of the many gender stereotypes we bring to the classroom. Rather than greeting children as "boys and girls," the invitation "children" or "friends" is more inclusive to those outside the gender binary. The other day, I overheard a child asking our librarian for a *girl book*, and our librarian questioned whether she wanted a book about a *real-life girl*, about any subject that she liked as a *girl herself*, a story with *many girls*, or a book to think about what it is to *be a girl in our world*? I will never forget the look on the child's face as her horizons broadened.

Practically, we have to create a welcoming space for everyone in our school communities and beyond. If we are mandated to say the Pledge of Allegiance, we can offer it in a language the children speak. We can request translation headphones for English speakers and allow community meetings to be conducted in Spanish. We can apply Braille to the backs of the Sandpaper Letters so that our blind students in the community may join us. With vulnerable listening and challenging reflection, we see that cultural relevancy can absolutely be a part

of the Montessori doctrine of peace. It is time for us to move toward consciously creating the equitable conditions in which true peace will flourish.

RESOURCES FOR CULTIVATING CULTURAL RELEVANCY

For 0–6:

Drawn Together by Minh Lê
Princess Hair by Sharee Miller
Carmela Full of Wishes by Matt de la Peña
Muhiima's Quest by Rahma Rodaah
Young Water Protectors: A Story about Standing Rock by Aslan Tudor and Kelly Tudor



For 6–12:

Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut by Derrick Barnes
George by Alex Gino
A Different Pond by Bao Phi
Amal Unbound by Aisha Saeed
Front Desk by Kelly Yang



For adults:

Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice (Wayne Au, Bill Bigelow, and Stan Karp, Eds.)
Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K–12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development (Enid Lee, Deborah Menkart, and Margo Okazawa-Rey, Eds.)
Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives by Sonia Nieto
Teaching for Black Lives (Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, and Wayne Au, Eds.)
RethinkingSchools.org



TAMMY OESTING and **ASHLEY SPEED** are administrators of the Facebook group The Diverse Classroom: Cultivating Anti-Bias and Inclusivity. Oesting is cofounder of ClassroomMechanics and is AMS-credentialed (Early Childhood, Elementary I–II). Speed is the founder of Diamond Montessori, in Vancouver, BC, Canada, and is AMI credentialed (Early Childhood). Contact them at tammyoesting@classroommechanics.com and diamondmontessoriltd@gmail.com.

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