

## Focus on Social Justice in Montessori January 2020

During this month of celebration of Martin Luther King Jr., it is appropriate to explore how social justice fits with the work of Maria Montessori. The American Montessori Society sums up the Montessorian perspective on social justice as the "...commitment to basic human rights such as freedom, dignity, safety, equitable treatment, and a standard of living adequate for health and well-being drive the Montessori commitment to education for peace and social justice. By creating respectful, inclusive classrooms, celebrating diversity in all its forms, crossing cultural boundaries, and modeling engaged citizenry, Montessori educators nurture students who will transform the world and make it a better place for their generation and the generations that follow."

Current Montessori educators take this thinking further. In the article, "Moving Beyond Peace Education to Social Justice Education", the authors present context for peace education occurring in Montessori schools all over the world.

*In the twentieth century, Dr. Maria Montessori used Cosmic Education as a way to educate humanity about the interconnectedness of all life. In the thick of wars and political aggression, Cosmic Education taught children to recognize the fundamental needs we all share and to respect the differences by which we meet those fundamental needs. However, because whole populations were displaced and the ways that whole groups of people have come to meet their needs were appropriated, access to peace is obstructed by systemic oppression. Cosmic, or peace, education, while a beautiful theory, is incomplete without the historical context and connection to social justice. Cosmic and peace education requires that we develop in children and in ourselves an understanding of the history of racial and social injustice and the tools to dismantle inequity*

The article goes on to point out that, while Montessorians believe the path to peace and social change is through children, we also know that a peaceful classroom is not enough to transfer peacefulness and the skills of peacemaking to our students. To study social justice is to learn about the problems that dramatically impact quality of life for certain populations, and how people have worked to solve those problems. We need students to understand the truth of systemic oppression and injustice, and we need to build in them the skills they will need to be peacemakers. When peace education is taught in Montessori schools, it is critical to acknowledge the truth of historical racial inequities, the effects of colonization, and ongoing consequences of xenophobia and racial bias in our communities and beyond. In Montessori education, we must share peace education in the larger context of social justice.

We know that not every student (or their families) will see things the same way when exploring economic, political, social and human rights issues in the classroom. That doesn't mean we don't talk about these issues. ***In fact, teaching students how to respectfully discuss an issue with people who don't see things the same way is a lesson that will serve them for the rest of their lives.***

To undertake peace and social justice education requires more than culturally and historically informed Montessori teachers bringing these ideas to the classroom. It is the work of the community at large. As a staff, we will be exploring the resources linked below and we encourage families to do so as well. Some ideas for bringing social justice themes into the home include:

1. Build a social justice library. Look over your child's books. Are diverse cultures and lifestyles represented authentically? Are there themes of inclusion? Do historical texts accurately depict the history of people of color? This applies to movies and shows as well.
2. Use teachable moments. When your child asks questions about differences in people they observe, answer their questions openly, with sensitivity, and without judgement. When your child hears a racist statement or sees an act of discrimination, talk about it.
3. Listen. Children often have inspiring and thoughtful ideas about the world around them. Listen when your child talks about their ideas.
4. Educate yourself and be aware of your biases. Be prepared for complex conversations by making the effort to gain accurate knowledge about social justice issues like colonization, slavery, racism, xenophobia, and political, social and human rights. Even climate change is linked to social justice issues!
5. Get out in the world. Volunteering and community service offer children a window into social inequities and a mechanism for helping others. When you travel, be open and honest about the different ways of life your child will likely observe.