

PROMOTING WORLD CITIZENSHIP: A CRUCIAL AREA OF STUDY

by Barbara L. Hacker

This article probes the vicissitudes of racism and how the multicultural perspectives of a Montessori preschool environment can prevent prejudices. Barbara Hacker is whole-heartedly committed to human unity transcending color differences. Racism is incompatible with a Montessori classroom that shares different holidays and cultures, builds social cohesion, and creates a safe and tolerant place.

My Montessori journey began with two momentous events in my life: my first observation in a primary class and my plunging into Dr. Montessori's writings. I have heard many describe their first observation in spiritual terms and that was what it was for me. There was an immediate recognition that "this is the way it is supposed to be." I saw what, as a child, I had longed for: purposeful work, independence, and opportunity to learn many things about which I was intensely interested.

Reading Montessori confirmed what I observed. The universal characteristics of children as the only rational basis for universal education seemed a thrilling revelation with tremendous implications for world peace. In addition, Montessori had profound insight as to how children could learn about community, learn about the Earth as our shared home, and develop the characteristics of fairness, respect, and independence of thought and action, the absence of which so often leads to violence and war.

My discovery of Montessori was in 1969, and in 1970 I enrolled in primary training. The spirit and excitement about what we were

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learning and its potential for peace was shared by my classmates and trainers. I began my work as a teacher with a feeling of gratitude to do a work that was so aligned with my values and desire to work toward world peace.

I considered Dr. Montessori an inspiration who was way ahead of her time in her thinking and understanding. She was a keen observer, and those many hours I spent in front of a lion's cage as part of my training taught me much about the skill of observation. She also demonstrated throughout her life the importance of continuing to learn and be aware of what others were doing and writing, and being on the cutting edge of science in particular. I have always been conscious of her example and have been a life-long learner because I was compelled by a force from within to learn and understand. It also seems like a necessity for anyone engaged in education. A particular path of learning for me has been a continuation of my undergraduate major in sociology/urban studies. I have continued to study the human community in all its diversity as well as the social diseases that have plagued it.

It seemed to me, as years went by, that there was less focus on Dr. Montessori's views on peace within the Montessori community, at least from the level I had first experienced. In the winter 2005 *NAMTA Journal*, I was thrilled to read Kay Baker's piece, titled with a question, "On Becoming a Citizen of the World: Can Montessori Achieve Its Aim?" (Baker 171-187). The question is one I have pondered a great deal, and her words stirred me like the discussions of the old days! I encourage everyone to read and discuss her chapter.

What I'd like to do here is suggest one path to achieving world peace, based on both my Montessori experience and my second area of study and work in dismantling racism through education. First, we must consider why humanity commits violence and wages wars. There are many reasons: to obtain land and other resources, over differing religious beliefs, to gain power and control, over longstanding disputes between cultural groups, to secure labor, to gain rights and opportunities, because of fear of the unknown, and probably even more "reasons." All these causes of violence and war seem to boil down to seeing members of the human family as "other" for a variety of reasons. One of those reasons is racism, or the belief

that the human family can be divided into separate groups based on inherent characteristics attributable to race. An essential part of making world citizenship possible is viewing all humanity as one. I'd like to propose a curriculum focus that promotes the oneness of humanity, but first I'd like to consider an established part of the Montessori curriculum as a point of reference.

There are events in history that mark such a tremendous change in how people understand themselves and the world that we call these events *paradigm shifts*. We consider 1492 as such for a variety of reasons. Surely Columbus's first voyage marked an important shift in history, but it wasn't a singular event. Often children are told that

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people thought the world was flat and even that the edges were inhabited by frightening creatures. They may have the impression that he changed that perception by his voyage and "discovered" America. Actually, there is compelling evidence that both North and South America were visited long before Columbus by both Europeans and Africans, not to mention those who crossed from Asia and populated the western hemisphere. When Columbus set out, he understood the Earth was round as did most educated Europeans. The less educated however likely persisted in false beliefs. The point is that paradigm shifts take time to be understood and to be embraced by all of humanity. Today we "get it" and it is a significant lesson in the primary class. The sandpaper globe is presented to the youngest primary students. It is our home and it is a sphere. Even though it is a somewhat abstract concept, it is of such importance that it is presented to the first-plane child as an important key to the understanding of geography.

We are today faced with another paradigm shift that many understand well but that other members of our human family still do not comprehend: that we are all one people in spite of our external characteristics, and there is no such thing as race in terms of biology. Race is a humanly constructed concept for a social purpose. Many may assume that everybody knows this, but in my experience,

many do not understand the full depth and implications. The science has mushroomed since Dr. Montessori's passing in 1954, and I feel certain that she would have wished for her followers to be on top of this research to realize its implications for peace.

Research in both genetics and anthropology has led to a deeper understanding of our oneness as a human community, though society as a whole has not embraced this understanding. I believe it is a concept that every educated person should internalize. The American Anthropological Association has undertaken a project to educate the public through a traveling exhibit, a book, a film, and workshops based on that film. It has been my privilege to be a facilitator for these workshops for a number of years with diverse groups of adults and young people.

The film and workshops are titled *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. The film's producer, Larry Adelman writes,

Race is one topic where we all think we are experts. Yet ask ten people to define race or name the races and you are likely to get ten different answers. Few issues are characterized by more contradictory assumptions and myths, each voiced with absolute certainty. In producing this series, we felt it was important to go back to first principles and ask, "What is this thing called race—a question so basic it is rarely raised. What we discovered is that most of our common assumptions about race—for instance, that the world's people can be divided biologically along racial lines—are wrong. Yet the consequences of racism are very real. How do we make sense of these two seeming contradictions? Our hope is that this series can help us all navigate through our myths and misconceptions, and scrutinize some of the assumptions we take for granted. In that sense the real subject of the film is not so much race, but the viewer, or more precisely the notions about race we all hold.

In conducting the workshops, we usually begin by passing out index cards and asking people to write their definition of race and how many races exist. The intent is not to embarrass people, and the cards are not collected, though we revisit the questions at the end of the workshop and people willingly acknowledge how much their understanding has shifted. The traveling exhibit begins with

a panel illustrating the things participants have written as their starting point and that reflects how prevalent the misinformation is in our society.

Race: The Power of an Illusion is a film in three episodes. The first, titled “The Difference Between Us” shows a diverse group of high school students undertaking something I think every adolescent should ideally experience: sequencing and comparing their own DNA. They begin by making predictions about who in the group they think will be closest to them genetically, and predictably they reason they will be closest to those who share their so-called racial characteristics. They discovered, however, that their closest genetic matches were as likely to be with students of other “races” as their own. They gained a profound and personal experience that illustrates that race has no biological or genetic foundation. They learn that not one trait or gene distinguishes all members of a so-called race. They have been given the basis for understanding that of the total amount of human variation, 85% exists within any local population. The genes for skin color have nothing to do with genes for hair form or eye shape. Neither do they have any connection to musical ability, athletic ability, or any forms of intelligence.

An awareness of this reality can, and I believe *should*, be taught to children at all levels, including primary. Of course this teaching needs to be presented in a manner consistent with their developmental level and learning characteristics. It doesn’t necessitate new materials or formal lessons but simply awareness on the part of the guide. I’ve always found the simple words of one of my grad school professors to be meaningful: “You can’t take someone somewhere unless you know where to go.” That seems appropriate when considering sharing this important perspective with young children. We know that children become aware of physical differences by age three (and recent research suggests even earlier), though they may not comprehend the layers of meaning adults attach to words. I recall a former student, age three, who heard adults in her home discussing people as “black and white” and popped up to announce that there were two white children in her class. As this student lived and went to school in a very diverse environment, her statement did not match her parents’ sense of reality. They asked her to identify the two “white” children, and she named herself and a little boy,



Courtesy of Tim Kahn

who like her had very light blond hair. Adults in the United States have grown up in a highly racialized society where the very words we use do not accurately describe reality and can form a barrier to the child's understanding.

Many children today enter primary already knowing the names of the colors displayed in the second color box. And to call people "white" or "black" is really a stretch. When the subject of skin color differences has arisen in the course of community life in primary, I have always told the children we are all one color: human skin color. We have something in our skin called melanin that protects us from getting burned by the sun. Some people have more and some people have less so we are different shades. Frequently older children immediately relate it to the third color box. Children find this information very satisfying in my experience.

When the question would arise as to why we have different amounts of melanin, I would explain that it depends on where the people in our family came from a very long time ago. If they came from a very hot place they needed more protection from the sun so they wouldn't get burned, so they developed more melanin. If they came from a place that was colder and didn't get so much sun, they didn't need so much melanin. But we get an important vitamin from the sun to keep us healthy called vitamin D, and developing

less melanin made it easier to get vitamin D from the sun. This was a satisfying answer for the age group and also served as a key to greater understanding later.

What an obstacle we place before children by leaving them alone to decipher the language of a racialized society! The obstacle grows larger when they hear adults say “I don’t see color.” Perhaps the intention of this commonly heard phrase is to say color should not make a difference in how people are treated, but it misses the mark in denying a person’s reality and certainly the perceptions of young children.

Another important point in preparing the environment for children to internalize the oneness of the human family is to refrain from using the word *race* incorrectly. It cannot be eliminated altogether because it has been and continues to be a central theme in American history and current events. Yet all around us, on TV and the Internet and print media, it is used when it is not appropriate. We are often asked to identify our race when there is no valid reason to do so. Certainly, in the school setting it is very important for language to be modeled correctly. Older students could compile examples from the wider environment of when it is used appropriately and inappropriately as a further activity to enhance comprehension of the topic.

Coming to terms with the fact that we are one humanity is only half the challenge. Because people believed there were separate races with different characteristics, racism exists. As historian Robin D. G. Kelley states, “[Racism] is not about how you look, it is about how people assign meaning to how you look” (qtd. in Adelman 9). The assigning of meaning to the fallacy of race has been at the very center of American history from its beginning. In the second part of the *Race: The Power of an Illusion* film and workshop, titled “The Story We Tell,” we are led through that history including how early science was used in defense of slavery, the treatment of native Americans, the war against Mexico, and the annexation of the Philippines. Racism played a direct part in all of these events, and there are many representative illustrations of many more events in our history. Author James W. Loewen has demonstrated so well how the textbooks most of us used in our pre-college days miseducated us regarding American history. He did a two-year study at

the Smithsonian Institute of textbooks that culminated in his book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. This compelling work illustrates how the textbooks from which most of us first learned history were deficient. In an attempt to offend no one, say nothing critical of any historical figure, promote a positive picture of the U.S. past and future, and ultimately be accepted by the state boards that review public school texts, textbooks were bland, boring volumes that leave out any controversy. In many cases, critical events are left out entirely and totally false information is presented and false impressions given.

While Montessorians take a different approach to teaching history, it is important to consider that adult Montessorians may have been miseducated in this area and could pass on false concepts unaware. This includes primary teachers before formal teaching of history begins, how holidays are shared, and what books are read aloud. We must guard against passing on history as mythology. For older students, are there new timelines that need to be created or old ones revised? Are the books available for student research accurate?

High school students are at an ideal age to learn about racism directly. More than sixteen years ago, the organization I helped to create and still serve, The Center for the Healing of Racism, assisted a teacher who had been through our course titled "Dialogue: Racism" to create a course based on it for high school students. It has been offered ever since to seniors at a private high school for girls and also open to students at the neighboring boys' school. These young people have the opportunity to understand the nature of racism in all its forms, the mechanisms by which it has been passed on historically and maintained today, and most importantly what they can do as caring, empowered individuals to aid in dismantling it.

Most important of all in overcoming the limits of our society and promoting world citizenship is promoting meaningful personal contact. In 1958, Dr. Martin Luther King said,

Men hate each other because they fear each other, and they fear each other because they don't know each other, and they don't know each other because they are often separated from each other.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering his "I Have a Dream Speech" at the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C. 08/28/1963

Two years later the Supreme Court made the important decision that separate education was inherently unequal. Today in the U.S., as we mark the 60th anniversary of that momentous decision, public schools seem more segregated than ever. Using Montessori education as a magnet for diversity was successful in many places, while many that started out as positive examples have reverted to being neighborhood schools or closed altogether. I think organized efforts to impact public school education must be made and especially in light of the president's call for universal preschool education.

Private schools were historically a logical path for Montessori educators seeking to do things "the right way" without interference from bureaucracies that didn't "get it." Private schools have been unevenly successful in achieving true integration. Parents may find it unappealing to send their children of color to a school in which they will be a clear minority both in terms of the student body and the faculty. They want their children to be safe, respected, and educated, and they are aware from their own experiences how frequently European American adults, though good, well-intentioned people,

may harbor stereotypes and unaware prejudices that they don't want their children to experience. It becomes a Catch-22, where a school may want more diversity and at the same time can't attract it until they have it.

If differences in economic level, which are growing wider all the time in America, are added into the situation, even a scholarship does not solve the problem when one child does not even have a bed to sleep in while classmates have multiple houses and a private jet to go between them on weekends. If we truly desire to produce world citizens, we need to discuss all these issues openly and brainstorm solutions. We need to acknowledge that the European American students are losing out if they do not have a clear-eyed cultural awareness, skill, comfort, and facility in working with people of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds. Every child has the right to an education that aids him or her to reach his or her fullest potential. We need to understand human rights and how unevenly they have been granted throughout our history. Holding a clear-eyed understanding of this concept should not lead to guilt, which is unproductive, but should give the freedom of comprehension of what too often separates people today. Understanding is the crucial first step to transcending wrong ideas and building a new future. Dr. Montessori's life gives us a courageous model of how to do that in our own time.

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