

Measuring equity in Montessori communities

Can we use classroom data to reveal and resist implicit bias?



BY **GENEVIEVE D'CRUZ**

Equity is entering more and more conversations, especially in public (conventional and Montessori) education. There are various definitions of the word, but for educational purposes, it means recognizing that all students do not begin from the same place, prioritizing fairness over equality, and meeting all students' needs. Educators and education scholars are looking for more explicit ways to embed inclusion and access into practice. As Montessori practitioners, we have both intangible and tangible ways to examine and measure whether our schools and classes provide an equitable experience for all children. Montessori philosophy lends itself well to social justice, but this requires more work than the citation of a quote every now and then. It requires active work to ensure that the children we serve have access to everything they need during their development, both in individual classes and whole schools.

Dr. Montessori described the preparation of the adult as a transformation of the spirit. This not only means what we learn in training (knowledge of development and growing our patience), but continued work on ourselves afterwards. We should continue to examine ourselves to note whether we are prepared adults, ready to provide the

children with an environment suitable for all their needs. An intangible way to note whether we are even able to provide a fair experience for the children in our care is to notice our own implicit bias—the internal stereotypes that unconsciously affect our actions and beliefs. Implicit bias can influence our lesson planning, how we speak to students, and assumptions we make about families. It is difficult to see our implicit bias, as it has been embedded in our belief system based on what we have heard, learned, experienced, and been taught. Observation, in principle, is meant to be objective. However, even in our objective observations of classes

against implicit bias is a practice and a habit to strengthen, and schools must support the adults doing this deeply personal work. Whether in the form of professional development presentations, workshops, individual conferences, small group meetings, or other methods, schools must take on the task of working against implicit bias and moving toward transformation. This cannot be optional work.

In *The Discovery of the Child*, Dr. Montessori wrote, “Teachers must be trained and schools transformed at the same time...it is necessary that they should be able to carry out these activities in the school.” She referred to

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and schools, we must ask ourselves where there might be bias. Implicit bias is combated by learning about our own biases, with tools such as Harvard University's Implicit Association Test, which tells test-takers which groups they see in negative and/or favored lenses. This is a starting point, for us to recognize our biases and become aware of them.

The work does not end there; when in situations where we notice our implicit biases bubbling up, we should take the opportunity to examine concrete facts. Additionally, we can actively seek out positive, individual, examples of stereotyped groups, and see them individually, rather than generalizing traits to the entire group. Working

experimentation and observation, but the principle can be applied to equity training as well. It is the responsibility of any Montessori school to actively work toward equitable experiences for its students. This includes training its teachers and helping them to become more aware of and counteract implicit bias. This work also feels intangible; it is internal. One cannot look at another person and know their implicit biases. However, asking oneself questions about one's beliefs and examining one's own thought processes and conversations can be a way to measure whether transformation is happening.

Working on implicit bias can be

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intangible and internal. But there are ways to visibly measure whether we are providing an equitable experience for children. As Montessori practitioners in a public setting, many if not most of us are required to use measures such as state-mandated standardized and testing to gather data about our children. We choose to work in practice, not policy, and so our work is to dance the line between keeping a public Montes-

ori space open and funded, and giving the children an authentic Montessori experience. In conventional spaces, the words, “data,” and “tracking,” are commonly tossed around. In Montessori spaces, those words have come to be feared and avoided.

Awareness of our shortcomings may even highlight our blind spots and implicit biases

But Dr. Montessori herself was a scientist. She observed children, wrote down observations, took data, and analyzed the results to unearth the method we use today. The steps of the method include questioning, doing research, constructing a hypothesis, testing it via experimentation, and analyzing the data. Analyzing data does not necessarily have to include standardized testing. Our way of tracking may be in the way we keep records, and our data might be our observations. However, we should allow room to consider that our implicit biases are likely affecting the way we record observations and track progress.

Dr. Montessori indirectly addressed this in *The Discovery of the Child*, stating, “When one is performing an experiment, he must for the time being

rid himself of all his prejudices, even those that may be the product of his own particular culture and background.” We must address our implicit biases and then scientifically examine our results—not always in that order.

One way to do this is to look at the student breakdown in our classrooms, and examine how much time we spend with each child. We could look at the racial and ethnic makeup of our classes, and examine records to see whether we are withholding specific materials from specific children due to our implicit biases. Are we spending less time with the children with IEPs, and is it due to them being out of the classroom, or to our own fears and assumptions? Are we giving the most presentations to the children who are normalized, though we know those not yet normalized need the most time with us?

We could look at lessons by area; are we giving fewer Practical Life lessons to males, and fewer Math lessons to females? Are we considering gender identity and non-conformity in the frequency with which we give lessons to children? This information could be gathered weekly to impact one’s own personal practice, and even monthly or quarterly to examine trends throughout the school. It can be difficult to see this data, especially if it is not as equitable as we think and hope it will be. Awareness, though, is the first step toward change; by seeing our shortcomings, they may even highlight our blind spots and implicit biases.

I implore those of you who work in public Montessori spaces, or spaces where data is discussed, to think of ways to systematically gather information about whether your students are being served in an equitable fashion. The systematic gathering of information does not require that the children are suddenly put into a factory model, as that is exactly what we avoid in our practice. However, due to our own biases, we may not be able to truly understand what is happening in our classrooms unless we see it in front of us. The objective is not to create extra work and overburden staff, but to examine the ways we are tracking observations and planning lessons, and embed in it a way to be more aware of how we serve our children and communities.

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