

What we've learned, and what we're learning

Steps along the way of the journey



BY **ELISE HUNEKE STONE**

I was feeling pretty positive about everything, including the equity and diversity work that was happening on the AMI 6-12 course, my ninth as Director of Elementary Training, with my new course assistant, Jennifer Wyld (an experienced Montessori elementary and adolescent teacher with a PhD in Free-Choice Learning from Oregon State University). I was offering the 6-12 legacy course and materials, preserved, sanctioned, and updated by AMI, with the addition of my own 20 years of classroom experience. Jen was guiding the group in regular short readings, discussions, and activities on social justice, current events, and the social realities of modern childhood.

Although I wasn't able to participate in most of the discussions, I did all the reading Jen offered to the students, and more on my own. I re-read all of my theory lectures and album introductions with an eye for bias. And I found some, just as previous examinations of my work had revealed instances where I was not inclusive of non-binary gender, neurodiversity, children living in poverty, and more. The songs we sing every morning in class came in for similar scrutiny; some of them no longer feel appropriate, and others need an introduction and a cultural

context to be respectful of those who first sang them.

I've been continuing my educational journey. I learned so much in an intense two-day workshop in Hartford, Connecticut, presented for the North American AMI teacher trainers, led by Connecticut's State Education Resource Center (SERC), a quasi-public agency established to support educational equity and excellence

Here in Portland, educators at the Confluence Project (a local nonprofit connecting people to the Columbia River through indigenous voices) inspired me to seek more ways to bring those voices into the classrooms where my students would eventually teach. I conducted exams for new elementary teachers finishing a MACTE training at Libertas School of Memphis, a Montessori school in an economically challenged black neighborhood, in part so that I could begin to understand what Cosmic Education would look like in

stories, and preparing themselves for written and oral exams. Their first practice teaching session went well. I presented the "People of the Zones" charts in the Work of Water, with their anachronistic and stereotypical depictions of human beings all over the world, and the students quickly recognized and claimed their agency in adapting the images for their own communities.

And then, an overheard remark from a student this spring gave me a new perspective. I can't even remember the occasion—it was outside of class, there was a guest speaker of some sort, and I heard my student say something like, "It's a good thing when your trainer says, 'Feel free to adapt this chart so that you're comfortable using it with the children in your community.' But it's not the same as if she'd said, 'We changed this chart so that any guide could use it for all children.'" In a way, I was giving the responsibility

I was giving the responsibility for culturally responsive teaching to the students—without practicing it, modeling it, or professing it myself

settings very different from the ones where I have worked myself. I made plans to attend the Montessori for Social Justice conference this summer.

The students on the course were getting most of their work in on time, practicing collaboratively with the materials, supporting each other, creating

for culturally responsive teaching to the students on the course—without practicing it, modeling it, or professing it myself.

And in a way, I was taking refuge in the legacy of the AMI training. Dr.

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Montessori wouldn't have wanted her work to be fossilized—she would have wanted it to stay lively, pertinent, contemporary. She wanted the elementary children to see themselves—and all human beings—as cosmic agents, free and responsible in the world. A lesson or a chart or a story that didn't help the children “find the center of [themselves] in all things” would not be useful or relevant.

And if the teachers don't see themselves in the material, how can the children? It was an epiphany. I have always believed I had served the 6-12 children of earlier decades very well, offering a cosmic vision of the universe, the earth with its interdependencies, human

beings with our special gifts and profound responsibilities. But though I had recognized the eventual autonomy of my students, and the value of the diversity and inclusion work we were doing, I had, until I heard that student, thought of the learning in terms of something we were doing that was good for them. Now I recognize that becoming a culturally responsive educator myself is one of the most meaningful ways to support equity and diversity. Now I am committed to being the change I hope to see in my students.

Elise Huneke Stone is the Elementary Director of Training at Montessori Northwest in Portland, Oregon.

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