

Language and Terminology Guide

A thinking tool for Montessori educators examining the language norms in their schools. Not a glossary to memorize. A set of intentional choices, and the reasoning behind them, that invites you to examine your own.

Language is never neutral. The words we use in our schools, in our handbooks, in our progress reports, in our hallway conversations, and in our Great Lessons communicate what we consider normal, whose experience we center, and whose we erase. Most of these choices are inherited rather than examined. We say what we have always said because it is what we were trained to say.

This guide documents the language choices Montessori Makers Group has made across its products, courses, and publications, and explains why. Some of these will be familiar. Some will be new. The point is not to prescribe a vocabulary but to model what it looks like to make language decisions intentionally rather than by default. Every term here represents a question your school can ask about its own language norms.

Language evolves. Communities name themselves. What is accurate and respectful today may shift as people and scholarship move. This guide will be updated. The practice of paying attention will not change.

Geography, Region, and the Names We Use for Places

How we name regions of the world reflects whose perspective is centered. 'Middle East' positions Southwest Asia and North Africa relative to Europe. 'The Americas' obscures thousands of distinct nations and peoples. The Great Lessons tell the story of the whole world. The names we use in that telling should not reproduce colonial geography.

SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa)

Instead of: 'Middle East,' 'Near East'

The term 'Middle East' was coined by British colonial strategists to describe the region's position relative to Britain. It centers Europe as the reference point. SWANA is a geographic descriptor that names the region on its own terms. It is increasingly used by scholars, organizers, and communities from the region itself. In Montessori's Great Lessons and cultural studies, this shift matters: when we teach children about the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley, the frame we put around those civilizations communicates whether they are origins of human knowledge or footnotes in a European story.

Ask yourself: When your school teaches about ancient civilizations in this region, what term do you use? What does that term communicate about whose perspective is centered?

Specific nation or people names when possible

Instead of: 'African,' 'Asian,' 'Native American' as monolithic categories

Africa has 54 countries and thousands of distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. Asia spans from Turkey to Japan. 'Native American' collapses hundreds of sovereign nations into a single category. Whenever possible, name the specific people, nation, or community: Yoruba, not African. Bengali, not Asian. Diné, not Native American. When you must use a continental or regional term, do so knowing it is an approximation, and name what it obscures.

Ask yourself: Look at your cultural studies materials. How often do you name a specific people or nation versus using a continental label?

Global South

Instead of: 'Third World,' 'developing countries,' 'underdeveloped nations'

'Third World' is a Cold War relic. 'Developing' and 'underdeveloped' position the Global North as the destination. 'Global South' is not perfect, it is not strictly geographic, and it still creates a binary, but it avoids the hierarchy embedded in the older terms. Use it with awareness that it is a political and economic descriptor, not a geographic one, and that the countries it groups together are enormously diverse.

Ask yourself: Does your school's curriculum frame some parts of the world as 'behind' or 'catching up'? What would it look like to present all regions as having complex, complete histories?

Enslaved people

Instead of: 'Slaves'

The word 'slave' defines a person by their condition. 'Enslaved person' names the condition as something done to them, preserving their humanity and making visible the system that created their status. This is not a small distinction. In the Great Lessons and in elementary cultural studies, how we speak about slavery teaches children whether they are learning about a system of power or a category of people.

Ask yourself: How does your school talk about slavery in its history presentations? Are enslaved people presented as agents with knowledge, resistance, and culture, or only as victims?

Indigenous, with a capital I

Instead of: 'indigenous' (lowercase), 'native' (generic)

Capitalizing Indigenous recognizes a collective political identity, not just a description. It parallels the capitalization of other proper identity terms. When referring to specific peoples, use the nation name. When speaking broadly about the rights, knowledge systems, and experiences of Indigenous peoples as a political category, capitalize it.

Identity, Community, and How People Name Themselves

The most important principle in identity language is that communities name themselves. When terminology is contested within a community, the respectful response is not to pick a side but to pay attention to who is speaking and what they prefer. These are the choices MMG has made based on current scholarship and community usage. They will evolve.

Latiné

Instead of: 'Hispanic,' 'Latino/a,' 'Latinx'

'Hispanic' centers Spanish colonization. 'Latino/a' reinforces a gender binary that the language itself encodes. 'Latinx' was created in English-language academic spaces and does not follow Spanish phonology, which is why many Spanish speakers find it imposed rather than chosen. 'Latiné' uses the Spanish gender-neutral suffix '-é,' which is gaining traction among Spanish-speaking communities and activists, particularly in Latin America. It respects both gender inclusivity and the phonological structure of the language. MMG uses Latiné across all publications and products.

Ask yourself: What term does your school use in its communications and materials? Have you asked your Latiné families and staff which term they prefer?

Black (capitalized)

Instead of: 'black' (lowercase), 'African American' as a blanket term

Capitalizing Black recognizes a shared cultural identity and political history, not just a skin color. 'African American' is accurate for some people and not for others: it does not include Black people from the Caribbean, Central and South America, Europe, or the African continent who do not identify with the American part. Use Black as the broader term and more specific identifiers when you know them.

Ask yourself: Does your school capitalize Black in its written communications? Do your forms and enrollment materials offer identity options that reflect the actual diversity of your Black families?

White (capitalized in structural contexts)

Instead of: Avoiding naming whiteness entirely

Some style guides lowercase 'white' to avoid giving whiteness the same status as a cultural identity. Others capitalize it to make whiteness visible as a structural position rather than an unmarked default. MMG capitalizes White when discussing white supremacy culture, whiteness as a system, or structural racism, because naming it clearly is more important than obscuring it through typographic choices. The goal is to make whiteness visible, not to leave it as the unnamed norm everything else is measured against.

Ask yourself: Does your school name whiteness in its equity conversations, or does it only name the identities of people of color?

Disabled / disability (identity-first when appropriate)

Instead of: 'Special needs,' 'differently abled,' 'handicapped'

'Special needs' is a euphemism that avoids naming disability directly, which communicates that disability is something to soften or hide. 'Differently abled' implies that disability is just a different way of being abled, which erases the real barriers disabled people face. Many disability justice advocates and disabled communities prefer identity-first language ('disabled person') because it names disability as a political and social identity, not a medical condition to work around. Some individuals prefer person-first language ('person with a disability'). When possible, follow the preference of the person or community in question. In institutional language, identity-first is increasingly standard in disability justice work.

Ask yourself: Does your school use 'special needs' in its handbook, on its website, or in conversation? What would change if you named disability directly?

Neurodivergent / neurodiversity

Instead of: 'Disorder,' 'deficit,' 'on the spectrum' (used vaguely)

The neurodiversity paradigm, developed by autistic scholars and advocates, frames neurological differences like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and others as natural human variation rather than pathology. 'Neurodivergent' describes a person whose neurology diverges from the dominant norm. This does not mean ignoring that neurodivergent people need specific support. It means the support is designed around how their mind works, not around making them approximate a neurotypical standard. For Montessori educators, this connects directly to following the child: are you following this child's actual development, or are you following a normative timeline and flagging deviations?

Ask yourself: When your school describes a neurodivergent child in progress reports or team meetings, is the language deficit-based or strengths-based? What framework are you using?

Queer (when used as a self-identifier or umbrella term)

Instead of: Using 'LGBTQ+' exclusively, or avoiding the topic entirely

Queer has been reclaimed by many people as an inclusive umbrella term for sexual and gender identities outside heterosexual and cisgender norms. It is not universally embraced, particularly by some older community members for whom it carries the weight of its history as a slur. MMG uses 'queer' in scholarly and community contexts where it is appropriate and uses 'LGBTQ+' in more general communications. The more important question for schools is not which acronym to use but whether queer and trans families, staff, and children are visible, affirmed, and structurally supported in your community.

Ask yourself: Are queer and trans families visible in your school's communications, materials, and events? Do your enrollment forms include options beyond 'mother/father'?

Family, School Community, and Whose Norms We Center

The everyday language of school life, how we refer to caregivers, how we describe family structures, how we talk about 'school readiness' and 'normalization,' communicates what your school considers standard. These are the terms that shape belonging before anyone reads your equity statement.

Family / families

Instead of: 'Parents,' 'moms and dads'

Not every child is raised by parents. Children live with grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings, foster caregivers, two mothers, two fathers, single caregivers, or other configurations that the word 'parent' does not capture. 'Family' includes everyone. It costs nothing to use and it signals to every caregiver in your community that they are seen. MMG uses 'family' and 'families' across all products and communications.

Ask yourself: Search your school's handbook, website, and email templates for the word 'parent.' How many times does it appear, and who does it exclude?

Family education

Instead of: 'Parent education,' 'parent night'

This follows directly from using 'family' instead of 'parent.' If the event is for the adults who care for the children in your school, call it what it is: family education. This also shifts the connotation. 'Parent education' implies teaching parents what they need to know. 'Family education' can hold space for mutual exchange.

Caregiver

Instead of: 'Parent' in medical, developmental, or intake contexts

In contexts where you need to identify the adult responsible for a child's care, 'caregiver' is more accurate and more inclusive than 'parent.' Use it on forms, in health and safety documentation, and in assessment language where you are referring to the adult's role in a child's development.

Multilingual (as a descriptor of children and families)

Instead of: 'ELL,' 'ESL,' 'limited English proficient,' 'non-English speaking'

'Limited English proficient' defines a child by what they lack. 'Non-English speaking' erases the languages they do speak. 'ELL' and 'ESL' frame English as the destination and everything else as the obstacle. A child who speaks Mandarin at home, Spanish with their grandmother, and English at school is not 'limited' in anything. They are multilingual. Name the asset, not the perceived deficit.

Ask yourself: How does your school describe children who speak languages other than English? Is the language in your records asset-based or deficit-based?

'Normalization' with context and care

Instead of: Using 'normalized' without explaining what it means in Montessori

In Montessori, 'normalization' has a specific technical meaning: the process by which a child finds deep concentration, purposeful work, and inner discipline through engagement with the prepared environment. Outside Montessori, the word means 'making normal,' which carries enormous weight when applied to children whose bodies, minds, cultures, or languages differ from the dominant norm. If your school uses this term, it requires explanation every time, and it requires honest examination of whether 'the normalized child' your training described implicitly looks like a white, neurotypical, English-speaking child from a two-parent household.

Ask yourself: When your school describes a child as 'not yet normalized,' what are the observable behaviors you are pointing to? Are those behaviors universal developmental markers, or are they culturally specific expectations?

'School readiness' examined, not assumed

Instead of: Using readiness criteria without questioning their origins

The concept of 'school readiness' assumes a normative developmental timeline and a set of behaviors that indicate a child is prepared for school. Those behaviors are culturally specific. A child who does not make sustained eye contact with adults is not necessarily unready for school; in some cultures, direct eye contact with authority figures is disrespectful. A child who does not sit still during a group lesson may be demonstrating a different kind of attention. If your school uses readiness criteria in admissions or placement, examine whose developmental norms those criteria reflect.

Ask yourself: Review your admissions readiness criteria. Could a child from a different cultural background fail to meet them not because of developmental delay but because of cultural difference?

Curriculum, History, and Whose Story Gets Told

The Great Lessons are cosmic education. They claim to tell the story of everything. That claim obligates us to examine whether 'everything' actually means everything, or whether it means the parts of the story that Western education has traditionally valued.

'Contributions from' or 'innovations by' (specific, active)

Instead of: 'Influenced by,' 'borrowed from,' 'inspired by'

When Montessori curriculum describes a mathematical concept that originated in India, saying it was 'influenced by Indian mathematicians' positions India as a background source rather than the origin. Say it directly: 'developed by Indian mathematicians' or 'originated in India.' Attribution matters. Passive framing minimizes the intellectual contributions of non-European peoples and positions European scholars as the active agents of knowledge.

Ask yourself: In your Great Lessons and cultural studies, who is described as inventing, creating, or developing, and who is described as influencing or inspiring?

'Colonization' and 'colonial,' named directly

Instead of: 'Exploration,' 'discovery,' 'settlement,' 'expansion'

'Columbus discovered America' is not history. It is colonial mythology. 'Discovery' erases the millions of people who were already there. 'Settlement' implies empty land. 'Expansion' frames invasion as growth. Name what happened: colonization, invasion, displacement, genocide. These are not controversial terms. They are accurate ones. Children deserve accurate history.

Ask yourself: Look at how your timeline of humans and your cultural studies describe the 15th through 19th centuries. Whose perspective does the narrative center?

'Knowledge systems' (plural)

Instead of: 'The scientific method,' 'Western science' as the default

Western science is one knowledge system among many. Indigenous ecological knowledge, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, and Islamic Golden Age scholarship all represent complete, rigorous knowledge systems with internal logic and centuries of practice. Montessori's cosmic education should present multiple knowledge systems as legitimate, not position Western science as the real knowledge and everything else as cultural context.

Ask yourself: When your school teaches about science and discovery, are non-Western knowledge systems presented with the same rigor and respect as Western ones?

'Civilization' used carefully, or replaced with 'society' or 'community'

Instead of: Using 'civilization' as a ranking

The word 'civilization' has historically been used to rank human societies, with European societies at the top and Indigenous, nomadic, and oral-tradition societies implicitly labeled as 'uncivilized.' In Montessori cultural studies, we can use the word if we define it broadly enough to include every human society that organized itself around shared practices, governance, art, and knowledge. But we should notice when 'civilization' is reserved for societies with written language, cities, and centralized government, because that definition excludes most of human experience.

Accurate time and place for mathematical and scientific concepts

Instead of: Attributing ideas to European 'discoverers' who learned them elsewhere

The 'Pythagorean theorem' was known in Babylon over a thousand years before Pythagoras. The concept of zero was developed in India and transmitted through SWANA scholars to Europe. Algebra comes from the Arabic 'al-jabr,' developed by al-Khwarizmi in 9th century Baghdad. When we attribute these ideas to their European popularizers rather than their actual origins, we teach children that knowledge flows from Europe outward. It does not. It never did.

Ask yourself: Trace the mathematical concepts in your elementary curriculum. How many are attributed to their actual geographic and cultural origins?

Institutional Language and the Words That Shape Practice

The language in your handbook, your job postings, your board minutes, and your staff meeting agendas is institutional infrastructure. It shapes what people understand to be normal, expected, and valued. These are the terms worth examining at the organizational level.

'Equity' as structural practice

Instead of: 'Diversity,' 'inclusion,' 'belonging' used interchangeably

These words are not synonyms. Diversity is who is in the room. Inclusion is whether they are welcomed. Belonging is whether the room was designed with them in mind. Equity is whether the structures, policies, and resource allocation actively redistribute power and access. Most Montessori schools have diversity. Some practice inclusion. Fewer have examined equity. Almost none have redesigned their structures around belonging. Know which word you mean, and use it precisely.

Ask yourself: When your school says 'equity,' what does it mean in practice? Can you point to a specific structural change your school made in the name of equity in the past year?

'Accountability' instead of 'awareness'

Instead of: 'Raising awareness,' 'building understanding,' 'creating dialogue'

Awareness is the beginning of equity work, not the destination. A school that 'raises awareness about implicit bias' and changes nothing structurally has not done equity work. It has done professional development. Accountability means naming who is responsible for what change, by when, and how you will know it happened. Shift your institutional language from awareness to accountability and the work changes.

'Access' as a design question, not a compliance question

Instead of: 'Accommodation,' 'modification,' 'differentiation'

Accommodation and modification frame access as an exception to the default design. The prepared environment in Montessori is supposed to be designed for all children. If you are constantly accommodating, the environment was not prepared for the children you have. Access is a design question: was this environment, this material, this communication, this event designed so that everyone can participate fully? If not, the design needs to change, not the person.

Ask yourself: How many 'accommodations' does your school make for individual children or families? What would it look like to redesign the default so those accommodations are unnecessary?

'Culture fit' examined and replaced

Instead of: 'Not a good fit' as an unexamined evaluation

'Not a good fit' is one of the most common phrases used to exclude people from Montessori schools, whether as students, staff, or families. It sounds neutral. It is not. 'Fit' assumes a fixed culture that the person must match, and it rarely interrogates whose culture is the standard. When you find yourself saying someone is 'not a good fit,' ask instead: what specifically is the misalignment, and is the misalignment about the person's values or about the school's comfort?

Ask yourself: In the past two years, has your school described anyone, child, staff member, or family, as 'not a good fit'? What was the actual misalignment, and who was asked to change?

'Historically excluded' or 'historically marginalized'

Instead of: 'Underserved,' 'underprivileged,' 'at-risk,' 'disadvantaged'

All of these euphemisms locate the problem in the person or community rather than in the systems that created the condition. Children are not 'at-risk.' They are placed at risk by systems that do not serve them. Communities are not 'underserved.' They are deliberately excluded from resources by policy and practice. 'Historically marginalized' and 'historically excluded' name the action and the system, not the people.

Ask yourself: Search your school's grant applications, marketing materials, and internal documents for 'at-risk,' 'underserved,' or 'underprivileged.' What would change if you named the system instead of the people?

CLOSING

Language Is Practice

This guide is not a rulebook. Language changes. Communities evolve in how they name themselves. New scholarship emerges. What matters is not that you memorize a correct vocabulary but that you build the practice of examining your language choices instead of inheriting them.

Every term in this guide represents a decision. Someone looked at the default and asked whether it was accurate, respectful, and honest. That is the practice. Do it with your handbook. Do it with your progress reports. Do it with your Great Lessons. Do it with the way you talk about children in team meetings when their families are not in the room.

The children are listening. They always are.