

Justice in Montessori: A Starting Framework

A practical framework for evaluating and improving the justice dimensions of Montessori practice

A Note on How to Use This

This is not a checklist. Checklists suggest that justice is a box to check — something you can finish. Justice work in Montessori is ongoing, contextual, and necessarily incomplete. What this framework offers instead is a way of thinking: a set of questions and lenses that you can return to repeatedly, at different stages of your own development and your school's.

Some of what follows will be familiar. Some will be uncomfortable. That discomfort is not a problem to manage — it is often the most useful part.

1. Who Is Montessori For?

Montessori was developed by Maria Montessori in the early 20th century, originally in a low-income neighborhood in Rome. Her first students were working-class children. The method was always intended for all children.

Questions to Sit With

- Who can access your school? What does tuition, location, and marketing communicate about who belongs?
- Does your admissions process advantage families with flexibility, resources, or prior Montessori knowledge?
- What would it take for your school to serve the full economic and racial diversity of your community?
- Is financial aid available? How is it structured? Who knows about it?

Practice Prompt

Map your enrollment demographics. Who is present? Who is not? What structures — intended or not — shape that distribution?

2. What Do the Materials Communicate?

Montessori materials were developed across decades, by many people, in a range of cultural contexts. Not all of them reflect current understanding of accurate, inclusive representation. The materials in your environment communicate to children what the world looks like, who matters, and what is considered 'normal.'

Questions to Sit With

- Do the figures, images, and cultural objects in your environment reflect the full diversity of humanity?
- Are non-Western cultural materials presented with accuracy and dignity — or as curiosities?
- Do children from your community see people who look like them in the environment?
- Are the Great Lessons presentations scientifically accurate about human origins and cultural development?

Practice Prompt

Do a materials walk. For each shelf, ask: what does this communicate about who the world belongs to?

3. Adult Culture and the Guide's Role

Bias — implicit and explicit — shapes observation, interpretation, and intervention in Montessori classrooms. A guide who has not examined their own assumptions will act on those assumptions, often without knowing it.

Questions to Sit With

- Do you observe all children with the same quality of attention and the same patience?
- Are behavior interpretations applied consistently across children of different backgrounds?
- Who receives more invitations to extend their work? Who receives more behavioral redirection?
- What training, if any, have you received in recognizing implicit bias in observation and assessment?

Practice Prompt

For one week, document your interactions by child. Who did you work with? Who did you redirect? What patterns emerge?

4. Curriculum and the Stories We Tell

Curriculum is not neutral. The stories told in Montessori elementary — through the Great Lessons, cultural materials, and language of instruction — either affirm or diminish children's sense of belonging and worth.

Questions to Sit With

- Do the Great Lessons present a Eurocentric or otherwise limited view of human history and achievement?
- Are the contributions of African, Asian, Indigenous, and other non-Western civilizations represented accurately?
- Does the language of cultural materials use 'primitive,' 'uncivilized,' or similar hierarchical terms?
- Are living cultures presented as living — or only as historical?

Practice Prompt

Audit your Great Lessons against the Great Lessons Audit Worksheet (free download, montessorimakersgroup.org/resources/free).

5. Family and Community Engagement

Montessori schools often expect families to understand and adopt the Montessori philosophy as a condition of genuine membership in the community. This expectation advantages families with time, education, and cultural familiarity — and implicitly excludes others.

Questions to Sit With

- Are parent education opportunities accessible — in terms of time, language, and assumed knowledge?
- Is the school's communication available in the languages spoken by families?
- Do families with less institutional experience feel equally welcome?
- Is the expectation that parents 'believe in Montessori' a barrier to families who are new to it?

Practice Prompt

Survey families who left your school or declined enrollment. Ask what barriers they encountered. Listen without defending.

Where to Go From Here

This framework is a starting point, not a destination. If it raised more questions than it answered, that is the correct outcome. Justice work requires ongoing examination, community, and the willingness to be wrong and to change.

Suggested Next Steps

- Complete the Great Lessons Audit Worksheet to identify specific curriculum revisions.
- Review the Origins Series for justice-centered Great Lesson reconstructions (montessorimakersgroup.org/learning/origins).
- Take the Equity in Montessori: A Practitioner Course for a structured 7-hour engagement with this work.
- Bring this framework to your staff in a professional development session — use the questions as discussion prompts.
- Revisit this framework annually. Your answers will change as you change.

For structured engagement with justice in Montessori, see the Equity in Montessori course at montessorimakersgroup.org/learning/courses

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