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From the Desk of the Human Rights & Social Justice Advisor

**Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of National Service
January 17, 2022**

"The Tranquilizing Drug of Gradualism"

Summer came, and the weather was beautiful. But the climate, the social climate of American life, erupted into lightning flashes, trembled with thunder, and vibrated to the relentless, growing rain of protest coming to life through the land. Explosively, America's third revolution – the [1963] Negro Revolution – had begun. (King, 1964)

What a telling example of how African American life in America is different yet so much the same. The same words that the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used to describe the racial climate in America in 1963 could be applied 57 years later to the public demands for change that were reignited in 2020 with George Floyd's brutal murder!

In 1956, the very respected and influential writer William Faulkner advised the NAACP to "go slow now" after a racial incident and protest at the University of Alabama. He further explained: "as long as there's a middle road, all right, I'll be on it." But if troops were sent to the South to integrate the schools and "it came to fighting," he continued, "I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes" (Wineapple, 2021). Dr. King, in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, shed light on that statement and advised Americans to resist the "tranquilizing drug of gradualism" (King, 1963) as we moved forward in our pursuit of human rights and social justice reform. This is especially important in our efforts to educate young Black, Indigenous & People of Color (BIPOC) children.

Dr. King was a strong advocate for education for African Americans and his statements align with the philosophy of Dr. Montessori. He wrote that "education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction. We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education. Complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate" (King, 1947).



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Dr. King was aware of the importance of African Americans knowing our history, embedding our culture in our learning and understanding that both would connect us to the wider society, but without losing our identities. He wrote: "broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living" (King, 1947).

At the risk of being redundant (because of the tranquilizing drug of gradualism), the United Negro College Fund reports that:

- Research has shown evidence of systemic bias in teacher expectations for African American students and non-Black teachers; the former were found to have lower expectations of Black students than Black teachers. Let's think about this situation and honestly evaluate if this is routinely happening in our Montessori world.
- Black students spend less time in the classroom due to discipline. In addition, Black children represent 19 percent of the nation's pre-school population, yet 47 percent of those receiving more than one out-of-school suspension. Let's think about this situation in the Montessori world? Who is most often not invited to re-enroll or is more likely to be released during a school year?
- There is a clear lack of Black representation in school personnel. According to a 2016 Department of Education report, only 10 percent of public-school principals were Black, compared to 80 percent who are White. Eighty-two percent of public-school educators are White, compared to 18 percent of teachers who are people of color. In addition, Black male teachers only constitute two percent of the teaching workforce. Let's think about it in relation to our Montessori workforce.
- College degrees are regarded as a primary vehicle for reducing poverty and closing the wealth gaps between POC and Whites. Additionally, Montessori training is a vehicle for closing the wealth and power gaps, as it is a path to becoming a lead guide and training to be a trainer.

Dr. King argued that moving slowly due to fear of rocking the boat actually works against correcting society's wrongs and only serves to create the illusion of progress. "He worried that by merely chipping away at injustice, we are lulled into a sense of advancement when very little is being accomplished. Ultimately, our delusions prevent us from making substantive change; the change that is desperately needed" (Dennis, 2020). "It is the calm and silent water that drowns men [marginalized groups]" (African Proverb, 2006).

The first King holiday was in 1986. In 1994, Congress passed the King Holiday and Service Act, designating Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday as a national day of service. The MLK Day of Service is the only federal holiday observed as a national day of service – a "day on, not a day off." The MLK Day of Service is a part of United We Serve, the President's national call to service initiative (American Democracy Project). It calls for Americans from all walks of life to work together to provide solutions to our most pressing national problems. Education is certainly a national problem.





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I penned this commentary for today to provoke cerebral and visceral reactions in each person reading it. This is a call-to-action statement to enter a different type of service to create better educational pathways for all children, especially young children of color.

Colleagues, though I'm sure you can think of many more efforts, I offer that this is a great week to:

- Ensure your admission and adult engagement policies are not gatekeeping policies;
- Contemplate which of your assistants of color would make a great guide and help them create a viable plan to achieve it;
- Think about recruiting a person of color for your next administrative position;
- Realize that preparing adults to provide high quality teaching and school environments that nurture the whole child, cannot be accomplished gradually using one approach, it must be done by "any means necessary." (Brook, C.)
- Establish a broad-based committee to develop your equity statement.
- Develop a concrete strategy to intentionally include issues of race, diversity and social justice in your curricula and incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural competency training for school-based staff to foster an inclusive environment and increase overall achievement.

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