



## Additional Thoughts

The AMI Talk of 19 November on “Nurturing the Democratic Spirit in Education” was well attended and we thank our presenters Pavithra Rajagopalan and Koen Schaap for sharing their insights. And we thank our audience for asking such deep and pertinent questions. While we tried to address a selection of these in the Q & A session that followed, we were sorry that for want of sufficient time, a number of thought-provoking questions went unanswered. In our concluding remarks we promised to revisit the questions and share more thoughts from the presenters. Here they are! If these prompt further comments or questions, please do share them with us at: [info@montessori-ami.org](mailto:info@montessori-ami.org) and we will relay to either Pavithra or Koen.

**Question: If our education systems condition children to be passive, what practical steps can schools take to actively uncondition these habits and nurture genuine democratic participation?**

**In many Ugandan schools where the teacher is seen as the final authority, how can we gradually shift toward a learning environment where children’s voices genuinely influence daily decisions?**

Pavithra Rajagopalan reflects:

While it is true that the conditioning we have from our lives outside the schools influences what happens inside, there is also the possibility to disrupt this cycle by, as you say ‘unconditioning the habits’. Maybe the first step is to become aware of these conditioned responses and behaviours we have ourselves as adults. This has to be a regular exercise of questioning where we evaluate our words, actions, habits, attitudes, etc. When we find that a few of these are automatic responses to situations, it is something that we can look out for the next time it happens. Maybe the third time it is about to happen, we are able to catch ourselves from responding in the same way. Not responding is a response. Once we have done this, then we have time to think about and discuss with others what are more suitable responses to these situations instead of the pre-conditioned ones. Try out a few, and find those that suit the needs of the children. These responses may have to vary depending on the children as well. For example, a lot of the times, teachers are the ones who choose the children who can present in wider public gatherings, in front of parents, at school assembly, etc. Teachers normally choose the children who are most confident and who are a good reflection of our work with them in the classroom. This is one of those pre-conditioned habits. Sometimes, when we have children who are not as ‘good’ at presenting, but are eager and confident, we are tempted to say to them ‘not now’ ‘Get better’. What could be alternative responses to such a situation which promotes participation, equality of voices, helping children make choices? What should the responsibility of the adult be in helping this child feel like that they could actually do a good job of presenting? Could the children be eventually led to decide who presents?

**The new curriculum emphasizes learner-centered teaching. How can schools ensure that this goes beyond group work and becomes genuine democratic participation where learners influence decisions about their learning?**

Tokenistic participation is one of those things that might make us feel like we are being inclusive in our practice, but should not remain at that level. So, we need to ask ourselves: at what level do the children get involved in the work they engage in at school? When we decide to make a change from being adult-centric to learner-centric, we may go through these different stages of this process. In the child's experience in school when we make a change, we might start off with a Consultative process (which means it will be adult-led and managed, with some input from the children), leading to Collaborative (adult-led, managed in partnership with the children) and finally more Child-led (children initiate the process, manage it with some input as required from the adult but children are in-charge of their learning). As you can see, the last stage is the goal, but we need to build up to it gradually by helping children create the capacities or skills required to arrive at this stage. So it might start off being a consultative process, where even though it is the adult who is making a lot of the choices, but you are making your choices vocal, where the children get to hear why it is the way it is. Gradually you bring in their views as this consultative process becomes more collaborative, eventually leading to child-led. It can be done with something as simple as planning the lessons for the children, or the homework that is assigned, deciding on school/community projects to be engaged with etc..

**Given that many Ugandan classrooms have 60–100 and even more learners most especially in government schools, how can teachers create democratic spaces where every child, not just the outspoken ones, has a voice in shaping the learning process? How can schools ensure democratic learning for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds such as those who lack confidence, come from low-income homes, or speak minority languages so their voices truly shape the learning experience?**

This aspect of nurturing children based on their abilities, contexts, and experiences comes down to how much the adult is able to observe, and how much time they have to go the extra mile in making sure every voice is heard. As a first step, it is important for the adult to notice the 'strong' and 'weak' voices in their classes. This might actually mean that we need to take a step back from being the dominant voice to facilitating participation where there is freedom for children to participate. This lays the ground for us to watch and make note of these voices. Then, depending on what we know about the 'quieter' children, their abilities, backgrounds, we have to actively create situations in which they feel that their voice matters. Helping those children who are naturally confident and vocal to feel the responsibility towards their peers in ensuring equal participation is important. This takes time and effort, but something that reaps huge rewards. It also makes us as adults to evaluate the idea of psychological safety that children feel or don't feel in our learning environments. If we as adults, are open to seeing it, we will be able to identify those situations where we may be inadvertently creating barriers to expression. We may also have to get creative in how we ensure participation and expression because not everyone is naturally vocal or verbal. So helping children use different mediums of communication will be important.

**Do you have some perspectives or experiences on your topic regarding implementing Montessori in less democratically oriented societies/ countries? The elements outlined can be really challenging for adults/guides to manifest in some places. In Uganda, children are raised to 'respect elders' and often hesitate to question teachers. How can schools balance cultural respect with encouraging learners to participate democratically and influence classroom decisions?**

Before we do anything else, we may have to be clear in our minds that this way of approaching children and their learning experiences is actually beneficial. What do we want to see as outcomes of a democratic learning experience? How does it benefit the individual? Please give these questions some thought. Hopefully, it might help us to see that no matter the political climate in the region, doing what we need to do with the children is still possible. It takes a little extra from the adults though. The extra effort goes into this process of contemplation which clarifies for us why we want this experience for the children, helps us to identify those practices and situations in ours and the children's lives that are not helpful or even harmful. Once we have identified some of these practices, we ask ourselves and others around us if there is another way or other ways. When there are situations which fall in a grey area, where we see the merit of a practice, but we also recognise that it may not be an entirely democratic practice, it opens up the possibility for discussing with the children about what they think of it, how they feel about having to be a part of it, have there been times when this practice has made them feel bad about themselves in any way, etc.. And then we go about creating new ways of being with the help of the entire group that includes the children. As adults, we have to be prepared for practices to change and evolve. If we hold on to something because it has been done for a long time, there comes a time, when it starts to lose its relevance. We have to be ready for change at this stage. But we can be participants in the bringing in of change, along with children.

**If you have any further comments or questions, please connect with the AMI team at [info@montessori-ami.org](mailto:info@montessori-ami.org)**

Let's wrap up with a quote by Maria Montessori from Education for a New World.

It is a recognition that education cannot begin too soon, if we want human beings to be worthy citizens in a free democracy.