

SEED [Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity] is an organization developed in 1987 by Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style. It was founded at Wellesley College, and today it is the largest nationwide professional development project led by peers.

The SEED website outlines their work: "The National SEED ProjectSM is a peer-led professional development program that creates conversational communities to drive personal, organizational, and societal change toward greater equity and diversity. We do this by training individuals to facilitate ongoing seminars within their own institutions and communities. SEED leaders design their seminars to include personal reflection and testimony, listening to others' voices, and learning experientially and collectively. Through this methodology, SEED equips us to connect our lives to one another and to society at large by acknowledging systems of oppression, power, and privilege."

SEED helps teachers become authorities on themselves and create a respectful community for each other, and furthermore, SEED helps teachers become more aware of their work in classrooms, with colleagues, and with families.

<http://nationalseedproject.org>

SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION and WSMS HELPING TEACHERS SUPPORT A CULTURE OF EQUITY

By Giuliana de Grazia, Head Teacher 3Wam/pm



When I first toured WSMS, I learned that economic, cultural and ethnic diversity had been part of the DNA of this school since its founding. I discovered that WSMS was one of the first NYC independent early childhood schools to define diversity as an essential part of its mission and had created a financial aid program to address equity of access more than 50 years ago. I came to learn that WSMS was also a community that is continually reflecting on its practice and growing through professional development, supportive leadership, and a faculty of dedicated, creative, and curious teachers. I soon realized that WSMS was a place in which I could further develop and share my passion for social justice education.

While working on my Masters in Early Childhood and Special Education at Bank Street College of Education, I completed an independent study called "Reflecting Together on Race, Privilege, and Teaching: Why Bank Street Needs Stronger Commitment to Teacher Education in Social Justice." In my search for programs that successfully prepared teachers for diverse classrooms, I discovered an organization known as SEED [Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity]. The work they were doing really impressed me: it was reflective and collaborative, professional and personal. Last year, with Mimi's support, I was able to attend SEED leadership training, which has allowed me to

continue this work for myself and to share it with a trusted, caring, brilliant community of teachers at WSMS.

The work we do together at SEED also aligns with the life experience I have had outside of an early childhood classroom. Some experiences have been painful, even excruciating, but they have made me more aware, compassionate, and active in speaking up about injustice. I care deeply about supporting victims of rape and sexual assault, helping adolescents and young women and men to develop positive body image and to overcome eating disorders, de-stigmatizing mental health disorders, and facing the gross reality of the state of our country's prison system. I've come to see how so much of the injustice is interconnected and holds firm in our complicated and busy lives. I also feel strongly that a simple way to learn, heal, and build a healthy community is through finding the space and courage to have hard conversations. I am thrilled that WSMS is proving to be a place for teachers to undertake these conversations, so that we can better understand ourselves, our society, and the teaching practice to which we are all so fully committed.

DO WE REALLY NEED SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SCHOOL?

It may seem that social justice education—or learning about and challenging the injustices in our society that are related to racism, sexism, economic disparity, ableism, sexual identity, etc.—have no place in early child-

WSMS TEACHERS INVOLVED WITH SEED



First Row, left to right: Erica Clarke (3E), Lindsay Cohen (3Wam), Annie Donovan (4W), Rebecca Estamago (4W), Akwanza Gleaves (1W)
 Second Row, left to right: Lauren Levine (3Wam), Divya Narang (3Wam), Elisa Rosoff (G), Joan Shisler (2E and 2W LAP), Nina Wheeler-Roberts (2E LAP)

hood education, or are unnecessary areas of expertise for early childhood educators. In fact, this work is critical. There is a clear need for teachers to better understand themselves and their perspectives while working in the diverse classrooms we are so lucky in-habit at WSMS.

Current research and Dr. Maria Montessori's philosophy both point to reasons why we, as a community of adults who care deeply about the early childhood experience of our children, should pay attention to our own behaviors and perspectives.

First, a sampling of research shows:

- Children are not only living in an unequal society, they also develop an awareness of race and ethnicity at a young age, and they make assumptions based on what their society teaches them (Soto & Swadener, 2002; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).
- By three years old, children have already developed ingroup preference (Bronson & Merryman, 2009).
- Soto and Swadener note in "Towards Liberatory Early Childhood Theory..." that while "it has taken a whole 'oppressive village' to systematically educate young children to internalize racial stereotypes and hatred...at the same time these research projects helped make the case that early childhood education is truly a window of opportunity for equity, social justice, and reconstruction" (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 44).

Second, due to the highly malleable, "absorbent" state of the child during these primary years that Dr. Montessori writes so beautifully about:

- Children are taking in all of the information offered to them by their environment and the people they interact with, especially the teachers and parents they look to for guidance.
- We need to be especially aware of our own biases, preferences, and understandings as we interact with these rapidly developing young people.
- We need to be well-educated on the importance of having a classroom that reflects everyone within it, that respects the differences in the family and home cultures of our students, and that gives each child a safe place to be known and to celebrate his or her unique identity.

WSMS TEACHERS SEEK EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

How do we create these equitable classrooms and positive relationships with families? We start with ourselves. As I've learned through my facilitator training at SEED, this is where we begin: we look into ourselves, our ideas, our practices, and we discuss and explore our perceptions with others, using resources, activities, and a dedication to sensitivity, openness, and honesty. I have the privilege of working with ten colleagues this year who meet with me once a month on Friday afternoons to engage in community building. We have deep very personal discussions related to a story we've been told,

or a film we've seen. We write about our experiences with gender, race, power and then talk some more. We're both challenged and delighted by what we are learning about each other and ourselves. Mimi is supportive and eager for us to continue and to expand our efforts to include more teachers.

Through SEED, teachers have a real opportunity to grow. Through their growth, this community can become a place that is more aware of its own diversity, and thus better able to celebrate, support, and respect every teacher, every family, and every child. This brings me back to the question of why I do SEED at WSMS.

I do SEED at WSMS because it is a place where we are all growing, children and adults alike. And through that growth, particularly the development of the young child, we bring peace and justice to our society.

Dr Montessori captures our shared vision:

"An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual, and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live." (Education and Peace)

"We then become witnesses to the development of the human soul; the emergence of the New Man, who will no longer be the victim of events but, thanks to his clarity of vision, will become able to direct and to mould the future of mankind." (The Absorbent Mind, 8)

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PERSPECTIVES

It is clear from Giuls' heartfelt piece that SEED has had a major impact on her, personally and professionally, and that it inspired her to share that with her colleagues. Several of them offer their thoughts—even using poetry as a venue which echoes Giuls' "lifetime of experience"—confirming the profound value of their ongoing discussions:

The implementation of SEED at West Side has been one of the highlights of my teaching year. By meeting together to discuss hot-button topics such as oppression, power, and privilege, I have come to better understand how personal experiences have shaped the lens through which I look at my world and that of my colleagues. Honestly sharing our own stories in an intimate and trusting setting allowed room for each of our voices to be heard and reflected upon... and I felt the connections between every teacher grow. I believe SEED has given us some of the tools we can use to become better-informed, empathic adults for the children in our care.

—Rebecca Estomago

In SEED, we started off with conversations about our backgrounds, and these conversations grew very organically to include our honest personal thoughts, worries, and biases. We discovered the dangers of a single story, and heard from each other about our experiences as a child. Most transformative for me was an ongoing conversation about what it means to be an American. I think that for many people, being an American means being white, wealthy, and male. The questions we responded to do not just make us think of historical problems, unfortunately. The conversations we had were important because of the great injustices our country endures right now.

I think it is important that teaching be considered a way to foster peace, justice, and equality. That is why, after exploring many career options, I fortunately found Montessori education. When it comes to the children, we may not

speak so directly as we do with adults, but as professionals, we should be ready to tackle issues of race and gender head on in order to grow and educate the next generation. I appreciate that there was an avenue for me to do that and a community within WSMS that truly cares about this.

Together we watched *The Color of Fear*, a documentary about eight men brought together to discuss race in America. We saw that being able to understand the pain of an other person's experience can inspire change from within. Also, when a person is able to share an experience, the voicing offers relief and it can break down barriers. I learned that we cannot stomp out voices and we have to make sure people are listening well to the "uncomfortable" issues. While these social problems are big and challenging, they have everything to do with our culture and how we are raised and, therefore, these discussions do translate to teaching in early childhood classrooms. We want to show children the experiences of others and help them to express themselves. We show them a path towards peace and how to care for others. Teaching children how to understand others is an even larger goal. SEED has reminded me of the significance in this, as we work to create peace at a global level.

—Lindsay Cohen

After my first session of SEED, I came away thinking: Why I had never heard of this organization before? We spend a big chunk of our day with our colleagues, and we try to get to know each other by sharing tidbits of information of our daily lives, but we are always careful to never bring, religion, money, race or even politics in our conversations. And that's true for all work places no matter what the profession.

What SEED offers us here at WSMS is the opportunity to really see each other. We learn to celebrate the diversity that each of us brings to this institution. Having a safe haven—to talk, to discuss and identify biases and prejudices in the outside world—makes us reflect

on our own, intentional or not. Teachers attending these meetings become more self-aware and consciously seek to avoid biases, both in themselves and in the children they shape and mold throughout the year.

—Divya Narang

Girl

Wake up, roll out of bed – forward,
backward it doesn't matter.
Nourish yourself – eggs with cheese
melted in? Please, Dad.

Clothing doesn't have to match –
orange, pink, polkadot...
I like red and black, pink is ugly except
for when I paint my nails that sparkly
fuchsia. Bitten nails.

This is the game of Life. Roll the dice.
Move your car. Here is where you get
married! Pick a little pink person, or a
little blue...to join you on this journey
of life.

Or don't get married at all.

Wow, you're zooming right along,
having a baby already? Adopt a girl!
Adopt a boy!
Enjoy dolls, help mom sew satin dresses
for Barbie. Roll with the Hess trucks
along the living room rug, beyond to
the kitchen linoleum.

Sing. Draw. Dance. Run.

Basketball and creek jumping in the
woods behind the middle school.
Daydreaming about crushes – that boy
Connor made my knees weak. I saw
him at Old Navy.

Help Dad with the laundry, Mom with
the garden. I don't want to put my
hands in the dirt right now. Time for
bed. Sheep follow one another off the
edge of a cliff. Don't be a sheep, my
parents said.

Be
Anything
But.

—Elisa Rosoff