





**Speaking in
My Mother Tongue:
What It Means to Be a
Montessori Teacher of Color**

By Daisy Han, MEd

In the stillness of the night, my mother holds my little hand, gently whispering apologies and wishes to me in Korean, like a reverent incantation. I'm alarmed but curious—as though I'd caught Santa stuffing my stocking. I'm not sure what is really happening and what I am imagining, but regardless, I will not interfere with this magic.

I try to keep my breathing steady and listen carefully.

I love you. I'm sorry for not being able to love you better. My mother says this so softly it's more like an exhale.

After a few less-audible breaths of prayer, she tucks me in and floats quietly out of my bedroom. *Was she there at all?*

I do not know how many times this happened or why she felt she could only say this to me while I was asleep, but it is one of the only memories I have of my mother apologizing, freely speaking to me as a child.

On many nights, I would fall asleep to the view of my mom reading, her voice in my ear. Now, when I speak Korean with what my mom calls “a third-grader’s proficiency,” I wonder if back then even my dreams were in Korean—if the language was so much a part of me that it was the language of my subconscious.

Every day after elementary school, when I stepped across our front stoop back into my home, I entered a different world.

In our waking hours, my family and I labored through translations from Korean to English, English to Korean, sometimes settling for Ko-english in arguments. Often people only experience culture shock when traveling to a new country, but for me, every day after elementary school, when I stepped across our front stoop back into my home, I entered a different world.

The smell was the first thing to hit me: the dryer vent pumping out the smell of Downy in a futile battle against the aroma of fermented cabbage (like vinegar and musty wine); next, I'd hear the television playing the latest Korean drama my mom had picked up on VHS from the Korean grocery store 40 minutes away.

But, every morning, I transformed into an American child. I would leave my home, dressed in a polo shirt, Chuck Taylors, and blue jeans, carrying a brown-bag lunch with a ham-and-cheese sandwich on Wonder Bread. “Brush your teeth again!” my mom reminded me, as I was about to step out of the front door. (I had

eaten kimchi that morning with my porridge.) That was a close one; the culture shock became numbness, the numbness became routine.

The routine kept my two worlds in a delicate balance, until one night, when I was in eighth grade and my sister was in fourth. My sister had a friend over after school, and she ended up staying for dinner because her parents were running late. That day, my mom had worked for hours in the kitchen preparing a traditional Korean stew made from mung beans and anchovy broth. I loved this stew. There's a sharp aftertaste that clears your nasal passages and warms your intestines. When I taste it today, even after so many years have passed since childhood, I still remember the time I spent taking off the ends of the mung beans by hand, showing my mom how neatly they were cut, her warm smile of approval mixed with gratitude.

My sister's friend hated the soup. She complained that it was smelly and wouldn't try it. I looked at the soup that I loved, and for the first time noticed the fishy smell, the urine-colored broth.

My mother flashed her pearl-white teeth in a quick smile, “I'm sorry. If I knew you'd be joining us for dinner, I would make something different.” She got up from the table and began preparing a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese. “Mom,” I said, pretentiously shoving away my ceramic bowl, “I'll have some mac and cheese too, with ketchup”—as though Heinz ketchup made it extra American and my mom was a short-order chef.

My mom froze for an almost imperceptible second, as if to regain her balance on a tightrope, and then made mac and cheese for both of us. My mother, father, and sister continued eating the Korean meal; the girl was picked up; the incident was not spoken of again.

Looking back, I can remember the self-protection, confusion, and guilt I felt that day, but I still struggle to find the words—in English or in Korean. When that little girl came barging into our private sphere and insulted it, she forced me to confront the hyphen in my identity. The hyphen, a sign used to join words to indicate that they have a combined meaning, to indicate the division of a word at the end of a line. What previously was a scale of compromise and calculation, even and parallel to the ground, delicately balancing two parts of me, now exposed the tension in my life as a Korean—hyphen—American. The hyphen became an indicator of more to be said.

Perhaps this is why I love children's books so dearly. In a two-dimensional world where there is a clear beginning, middle, and end, life is simple and pure. I remember how, after dinner, my sister and I would bathe, get in our soft cotton jersey pajamas, and snuggle up



together in my twin bed, legs all tangled and skin still warm from the bath. My mom would walk in like a performer after a grand show, exhausted but satisfied with the performance: Everyone is well fed. She'd lie down on her stomach on the carpet, right under the reading lamp, and my sister and I would clamor over to join her on either side of her body, like puppies yearning for their mother's heat.

All three of us would watch as she opened the cover and the spine crackled to life. She paused, looked at us briefly, and then began to read to us in her practiced upbeat voice. I alternated between looking at the watercolor illustrations and her perfect set of never-had-braces teeth. I loved watching how her mouth moved, lips forming the Korean sounds I only heard in the privacy of our home. She was at ease in a way that she never quite is speaking English.

"Do you think in Korean or English?" I ask her after one of these story times.

"Korean," she answers matter-of-factly (in English).

She was an animated reader, breathing life into the characters' voices, and read at just the right pace—as though she already knew the whole story, even if the book was brand new. I would gaze at her mouth, dexterous and full of life, my mother's tongue.

While I was born in San Jose, California, I might as well have been born in Seoul, Korea—Korean was all that I knew. Before I started school, every weekday, when my parents went to work, I'd walk down the hall to my grandparents' bedroom, and we would chatter in Korean about what we were going to do that day. My grandma would make me a light Korean breakfast of rice, beef, and eggs, and as soon as I was done would begin preparing lunch. I would sit on the

chattered in my mouth, and I was left exposed to a sea of white people who didn't understand me. My teacher squatted down next to me, pulled her eyes into slants, making "Asian" faces in a genuine, well-meaning attempt to cheer me up, and said, "Don't worry, my little china doll."

Looking around desperately for a place to anchor, I saw my mom's face at the window. Her eyes glued on me as she mouthed to me in Korean, 사랑해, *I love you*, and steadily cried with me.

That was when I knew that Korean, my mother tongue, was our language. Though she was the mother who read to me at home, her role as protector morphed into something different as she sent me off to a culturally different school that she didn't have the language or the power to navigate. In the space where the hyphen of my Korean-American identity was born, our roles flipped, and I became the one shepherding my parents in America. My mother stood on the outside of a system that was not designed for her or her daughter's success.

In that kindergarten classroom, I learned that to be a good American student I needed to eat mac and cheese with ketchup and speak in perfect English. I learned that I needed to leave my ethnic identity at the door. While it was okay for my classmates to say that I was the "token Asian" in everything from the National Honor Society to the lacrosse team, it was never okay for me to question why we were only studying from books written by white authors. Or why my fellow speech and debate teammate could call his dad, a powerful lawyer, to brief him on his speech minutes prior to our "extemporaneous" debate, while I was the translator for my parents.

What has been very clear to me as a Montessori educator, racial justice strategist, and Asian-American woman is that my success has largely depended on my ability to navigate white culture. On the other hand, the ignorance of white people about the white supremacy inherent in our culture has allowed for it to perpetuate white privilege and persist as the norm.

It wasn't until I stumbled upon Montessori education as an adult that I experienced healing from the deep trauma of assimilation and erasure I went through as a child. Through the beautiful Montessori pedagogy, I felt seen and could see, for the first time, an education that deeply honored the child and was rooted in social justice.

Before, I had mistaken that precarious hyphen of my identity for a subtraction sign: Take away my native language, minus my family loyalty and my favorite foods. Today, that hyphen has come to represent a dash, an added thought after a pause—more books in

But on the first day of kindergarten, the language, culture, and comfort of home violently collided into the institution of school.

sofa and watch the Korean news on television with my grandfather. Sometimes, we'd walk around the neighborhood or sit outside in the backyard looking at the clouds. Every name was said in Korean, every birthday song was sung in Korean. It was the language of home.

But on the first day of kindergarten, the language, culture, and comfort of home violently collided into the institution of school. Nervously shaking, my teeth

my library, new rich foods to try, a profession that I love, contributing work that I hope changes the world for the better.

Through my career as a Montessori teacher, I have been able to cultivate my voice to confront injustice in one of the most powerful platforms of them all: the classroom.

Recently, I was observing in a Lower Elementary classroom. I had a cold and my nose was running. A small girl with a fresh bob and wearing a bright yellow T-shirt stared at me and waved.

“Hi. You’re pretty,” she said, intently staring at me without blinking.

“Thank you,” I responded, trying to control the rush of snot dribbling down my face. “Do you think you could help me get some tissues?”

“Yes, would you like me to bring you some?”

“That would be wonderful!”

She brought me a tissue box with a walrus on it, and said, “Isn’t this a silly walrus?”

“He is a silly walrus. What a big belly!”

She laughed, shook my hand, introduced herself as Jade, and launched into a story about a tornado, caused by an alien king with three antennae. After sharing that, she asked me what I suspect she wanted to ask me from the beginning: “Are you Asian?”

I smiled and nodded. “Yes!”

Her face lit up with a huge grin, and she said, “Me too! I’m Korean-American.” Jade exclaimed her hyphenated identity with pride. It had been validated and valued as a plus, rather than as a subtraction.

She lunged forward to hug me and then told her teacher, “We are the same.”

The teacher, an African-American man, came over and said, “We know how important that is.” We clasped hands in both recognition and solidarity for a solid 4 seconds; it felt much longer.

This small interaction moved me to tears.

By this point in my observation, I had used up almost all of the tissues from the walrus tissue box and decided that it was time to quietly step out of the classroom. While gently closing the door, I heard Jade’s voice, saying just above a whisper, “Don’t leave.”

While Jade was in a classroom that affirmed her ethnic identity, she still whispered her closest feelings to me, as though she was afraid to speak them loud enough for everyone to hear, in an environment where she does not see herself.

Again, in this hyphenated duality of confidence and fear, I see the ways in which Montessori education has been a vehicle to offer this Korean-American student a sense of belonging, while also revealing an opportunity

for the Montessori community to grow and to cultivate the vulnerability to speak above a whisper our most deepest thoughts and feelings.

Through my career as a Montessori teacher, I have been able to cultivate my voice to confront injustice in one of the most powerful platforms of them all: the classroom.

Embracing Equity (wildflowerschools.org/embracing-equity) is an online personal development platform that three teachers and I created to respond to this challenge. It is hosted by Wildflower Schools and is free and open to everyone. In the program, small, intentionally racially diverse cohorts of individuals dive into their own racial and ethnic identities, building their own critical consciousness and looking into the mirror to unpack long-held assumptions.

The pilot program launched in 2016 to an overwhelming response—we received over 200 registrations. After a pre-survey and forming of cohorts, 80 people committed to the first 6-month program, which includes five online sessions.

As of this writing, we are in the midst of the first program. It has been an incredible learning experience. We have been sharing resources and working together to reimagine a world where resources, knowledge, access to support, and a community committed to everyone’s learning is available in a sustainable way.

Together, we can collectively use our voices to effect change. The power of the individual voice and the impact of the collective voice are the reasons I continue my work as a Montessori teacher of color.

DAISY HAN, MEd, is a partner at The Wildflower Foundation and co-founder and director of curriculum at DEEP: Disruptive Equity Education Project. She has taught in Montessori classrooms and served as a socio-emotional learning facilitator for over 10 years. She is AMS-credentialed (Elementary I–II, Secondary I–II). Contact her at daisy.han@wildflowerschools.org. To learn more about Embracing Equity, visit wildflowerschools.org/embracingequity.

Reference

U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *State of racial diversity in the educator workforce: Policy and program studies service; 2016 ASI 4806-10.78*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf>.