

From the Organizations

Reservations about the Global Marketplace

By Julia Volkman

Many of the companies that make Montessori materials were started by Montessori teachers—like me. We wanted to buy something for our classroom and couldn't find exactly what we wanted or couldn't afford what we wanted. So, we made it. Then, by some twist of fate, we discovered a way to make a lot of them for a fair price and, poof, our businesses were born.

Overall, Montessori material makers are a pretty rare breed in the corporate world. We are concerned about quality, pedagogical validity and the environmental impact of our work. If you speak with some of us at a conference it will be obvious who fits this profile and who doesn't.

Yet, we exist in a global marketplace where this genial community of friendly adversaries lies unprotected. Many of us have expressed concern and discomfort when our materials have been purchased by people from parts of the world where copyright and intellectual property laws are not often respected. Many of us have seen

our work copied by less scrupulous organizations right here in North America. We have been forced to wipe the rose color off our Montessorian glasses and admit that we live in a competitive corporate world where market forces often trump environmental and social concerns. We will survive...but we worry.

We suspect that companies that copy our work use raw materials that we wouldn't want our own child to handle. When I looked into printing Maitri Learning's cards abroad I discovered that the paper could not be guaranteed "refuse-free," let alone recycled or made from sustainably-harvested trees. I also could not get details on the type of laminate or ink used. When I received samples, they smelled. I thought they would air out like a new carpet but the smell remained.

I still don't know what was in those cards but I decided then and there not to print my cards anywhere where I couldn't control the materials used. This has not been an easy decision. I wonder how long it will be before

I see someone else selling "my" materials for lower costs. And then I feel the pull to let go of my ethical concerns and print print print for cheap cheap cheap! I want to drastically reduce my costs and prices so I can offer the best materials at phenomenal prices. But this pull is really just fear that my business faces an insurmountable threat. It is fear that my little creation will have a short life. Fear, however, is like the wind—ultimately it will blow by you. It may take my little company with it, but it will pass.

I think this situation reflects the types of challenges teachers face in Montessori classrooms. There is sometimes overwhelming pressure to change our methods or approach due to state curriculum requirements, parental demands or financial needs. Yet so many of us resist the pressure and continue to bring genuine Montessori to our children. It seems vendors should do no less.

So I continue to purchase the more expensive paper that is environmentally

sound. I use the more expensive laminate that is made in the U.S. where there are governmental controls over its contents and manufacturing process. I continue to pay the people who work with me as well as I can and give them flexible working hours. I continue to do what I feel is right and am optimistic that it will all work out. And when one of my vocabulary cards happens to find its way into my 16-month-old son's mouth, I don't worry about it...too much.

Julia Volkman is a Montessori primary teacher, the founder of Maitri Learning, and the reluctant point person of the Montessori Exhibitors Association (www.montessorisexhibitors.com).