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Culturally Sustaining Practices in Public Montessori Schools: A Landscape of the Literature

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Abstract

This literature review provides a broad examination of the importance of culturally sustaining practices in public Montessori schools. For the purpose of this paper, culturally sustaining practices refers to any pedagogical practice or framework that prioritizes the racial and social identities of children of color, and/or the work that educators must do to strengthen these culturally sustaining practices. Culturally sustaining practices include but are not limited to Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, which Paris (2012) adapted from Ladson-Billings' (1995) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Specifically examining the experiences that children of color experience in public Montessori education in the U.S., the author proposes that culturally sustaining practices combined with the Montessori method will lead to more humanizing and uplifting school experiences for Montessori families and educators. The research questions guiding the review are: (1) *How does public Montessori education intersect with racial justice, social justice, and CSP, specifically as it serves children of color?* (2) *What is the internal work required of adults who want to employ CSP in their practice with children?* The themes that arose from the literature were: the racial and economic challenges facing public Montessori in the U.S.; the varied experiences of Montessori students of color; the need for more social justice and culturally sustaining practices; and the aspects of culturally sustaining practices already existing in Montessori. The paper ends with recommendations for schools and Montessori teacher preparation. *Keywords: Montessori; public Montessori; social justice; Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy; children of color; racial justice; culturally sustaining practices*

Introduction and Context

Montessori education came to the United States in the 1950s, and has since expanded to a mostly private sector (Ackerman, 2019). Increasingly, more public Montessori programs are opening around the country, and they are often seen as sites for reform. Originally, Dr. Maria Montessori served poor children in a slum district, and many public Montessori schools opening up around the United States aim to work with families and children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantages. This also means that Montessori schools are not serving only White children, as they have for many years in the U.S. As Montessori programs increase and expand all over the country, more children have access to the method. However, with this work comes a great responsibility of sustaining the cultures of the communities where schools are located. This is where Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) enters the conversation. Paris (2012) developed the term "CSP," building off of Ladson-Billings' (1995) term Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, which refers to the idea that teachers should respond to students' cultural identities and include materials and lessons that represent students. CSP goes a step further, asserting that adults should not only represent students in schools, but that they should actively work to sustain and preserve students' identities. This requires internal work to understand one's own self, and self-reflection about race and identity so as to work with students in an authentic and respectful way. In conducting a review of the literature regarding CSP and the Montessori method, there is little to be found about the intersection of the two. Thus, for the purposes of the paper, I will refer to *culturally sustaining practices*. This term refers to any pedagogical and relational practices that uplift and humanize marginalized groups and children. It includes CSP, social justice, and racial justice. Culturally sustaining practices are crucial for Montessori adults in the U.S., particularly due to the large numbers of White Montessori adults in the field. These large numbers leave gaps

in thought and practice about how to best serve one of the most historically marginalized groups: children of color. Although the Montessori method originated as a tool for social justice, uplifting marginalized groups (evidenced by its origins in the slums of Rome), it is not always implemented in a way that promotes culturally sustaining and justice-driven practices.

Researcher Positionality

I am an Asian (Indian) American cisgender woman, raised in the southern United States. I claim a critical and caring stance toward Montessori theory and pedagogy. While I believe that the Montessori method has a myriad of strengths, I acknowledge that there are concepts that have not historically been addressed universally, and that there are gaps in knowledge and research that are yet to be filled, specifically when it comes to historically marginalized groups in the U.S. I am AMI-trained (Association Montessori Internationale) at the Primary level (ages 2.5-6), and worked in a public charter Montessori school for five years. My experience working in a public Montessori school is what led me to my interest in the topic at hand.

Research Question

In the Montessori community, the concept of the prepared adult refers to the preparation necessary (both professionally and personally, or internally) before working with children (Montessori, 1996, p. 89). However, there is little *explicit and universally-accepted training* or conversation about race reflection or culturally sustaining practices as preparation in the Montessori community. To explore this topic and create a landscape of literature on this topic, I gathered various articles and papers about public Montessori education, what racial and social justice work looks like in education practice, and the internal work required of the adult doing this work. I intentionally use the term “adult” instead of “teacher,” with the assertion that any adult who works in a school (interventionist, assistant, teacher, or administrator) must prepare for

their work with young people. There is one main question and one sub-question guiding this paper:

1. *How does public Montessori education intersect with culturally sustaining practices, specifically as it serves children of color?*
    a. *What is the internal work required of adults who want to employ CSP in their practice with children?*

Due to the limited existing research about racial identity and Montessori adults, the first question is broad, to encompass the varying ways that sociocultural, educational approaches influence how adults work with children of color. The second question is a sub-question that arose out of the existing research that contained responses to both questions.

Landscape of the Literature

The following topics arose in the literature: public Montessori faces racial and economic challenges in the U.S.; Montessori students of color have varied experiences; there is a need for more social justice and culturally sustaining practices; and aspects of culturally sustaining practices already existing in Montessori. Much of the research does not distinguish between the specific accreditation or organization behind Montessori schools. This makes it difficult to appropriately examine schools' practices, as they often differ too much to be comparable. Lillard (2019) expresses the crucial need to discuss Montessori programs that support faithful implementation of the method, as the name of the method is not patented. In this literature review, I will begin with the challenges of public Montessori, and continue with the remaining themes in the order listed above.

Theme 1: Public Montessori in the U.S. faces racial and economic challenges

The ordinary teacher may say: "I have brought my children up...I have taught this; I have developed their intellectual powers." But what have they done? Nothing. They have not developed; they have imposed themselves and crushed and impeded. This is the crime of the schools, especially at the period of development before six years (Montessori, 2012, p. 232).

With the growth of public Montessori programs in the United States, there also come many challenges. The Montessori curriculum does not always align with the state's grade-level standards. This is because it moves according to development and an individual child's interests. For example, concrete, tangible, explorations of algebra are introduced around the age of four (which does not appear in Common Core standards until much later). There are alignment maps about the Montessori curriculum and its alignment with Common Core standards; in fact, Montessori often introduces more advanced concepts at younger ages than what Common Core requires (Edwards, 2012). However, I will focus less on the academic challenges of public Montessori implementation, and more on the racial and economic challenges that public Montessori schools face (as institutions and for individual students).

Montessori schools are racially isolated. Mira Debs' 2016 study examines the racial and economic diversity of public Montessori school programs and finds a variety of outcomes. Although many of these schools (which are often charters or magnet schools) are racially and socioeconomically diverse, school choice presents a dilemma: many families do not know about the Montessori method, and therefore do not choose to enroll their children in the very schools that are created and designed to be accessible to all. Debs notes that even Montessori schools with missions of racial diversity are facing challenges maintaining it, and although there are

students of color who are in public Montessori schools, these schools are still isolated. Therefore, although students of color are receiving a Montessori education, fewer students than expected have a racially diverse experience.

Students and families do not feel connected to schools. Recently, Montessori has been used as a means to advance diversity (Martin, 2016). Like Debs, Martin discusses one challenge of Montessori implementation being the availability of Montessori options to low-income students. She goes even further, stating there are problems with how students are treated in Montessori classrooms and communities. In questioning how successful public Montessori has been in addressing educational inequity, she finds that there is also a problem with low-income and minority families feeling disenfranchised from schools. Debs (2016) and Chattin-Nichols (2016) both discuss the need for opportunities for all children to experience Montessori, Debs specifying even more about how charter schools should be working proactively to recruit racially diverse families. Martin (2016) echoes the same sentiment, also citing Debs' finding that families feel a "conflicted fit": appreciating the caring nature of a Montessori community while also feeling in the dark about the abstractness of the method.

Schools have unequal resources. Chattin-Nichols spent one year in a public Montessori school, and names multiple challenges for public Montessori implementation (2016). As per Lillard's (2019) request, he does state that many schools are not meeting the basic goals of the Montessori method (such as three-year age groupings, appropriate or any Montessori training, and a lack of Montessori materials). Although most of the challenges he discusses are about academics and testing, he also mentions the inequality of resources and opportunities in U.S. public schools. However, aside from this mention, he does not delve deeper into the problem of

inequality, other than to say that Montessori is a powerful form of education, even in situations that are less than ideal.

Theme 2: Montessori Students of Color Have Varied Experiences

> *Within a child there is a very scrupulous teacher. It is he who achieves these results in every child, no matter in what region he is found...It is as though nature had safeguarded each child from the influence of human intelligence in order to give the inner teacher that dictates within, the possibility of making a complete psychic construction before the human intelligence can come in contact with the spirit and influence it. (Montessori, 2012, p. 6)*

The Montessori school experience varies based on a student's race. Multiple researchers have examined the efficacy of Montessori for students of color, as well as the overall experiences of students and families of color. Ansari and Winsler (2014) examine children's gains in Montessori and conventional programs, comparing Latinx and Black children. Though the authors found that children made gains in cognitive, language, and motor skills in public pre-kindergarten programs, they found that children in Montessori schools did not exhibit greater gains in pre-academic, social, or behavioral skills. Upon finding that Latinx children excelled in Montessori programs, but Black children did not benefit as much, the authors suggest that, "Montessori philosophy might not benefit all low-income children equally." However, they do state that more Montessori research needs to be done. Debs and Brown (2017) also call for more Montessori research. They review the literature about the experiences of students of color and claim that public Montessori's efficacy could be limited by several factors: the lack of diversity of the teaching staff and culturally responsive teacher education (which I will return to later), schools that struggle to maintain racially diverse enrollment, and the challenge of

communicating the benefits of Montessori to families with alternative views or experiences of education. While Ansari and Winsler call for more research about why Montessori might be better for Latinx children's early learning, Debs and Brown step back further and call for examining Montessori student achievement by race and socioeconomic background, as well as informing the community about where the method is working and where it needs improvement.

Not all schools implement Montessori faithfully. Though neither Ansari and Winsler nor Debs and Brown discuss the importance of faithful Montessori implementation, Jor'dan (2017) discusses that not all classrooms implement Montessori the way it should be implemented. She uses Wilson's argument about the achievement orientation and natural genius of African American children. She claims that when implemented appropriately, Montessori education does recognize that every child has their own unique gifts, and argues that Montessori is a viable choice for African American children. Like Lillard (2019), Jor'dan calls for more research that uses and promotes authentic Montessori schools.

Public Montessori schools are not accessible to racially varied communities. One problem racially diverse students and families face is having access to Montessori programs. Debs (2016) discusses that public Montessori schools are not accessible to racially varied communities. Martin (2016) echoes this problem, citing Debs and adding that many Montessori schools do not enroll students without prior Montessori experience. This is due to the foundational nature of the method; if a student enters the program at an elementary level (from a conventional school), they will not have the background knowledge of the materials and lessons in Montessori, not to mention the lack of work habits that Montessori supports from a young age.

Racial discipline disproportionality exists in Montessori schools. An area where there is specific research is Brown and Steele's (2015) study on racial discipline disproportionality in

Montessori and conventional public schools. The authors found that although Montessori schools are less likely to suspend Black students than White students (conventional schools have a higher rate), racial discipline disproportionality still exists. The authors ask that Montessori programs and teacher preparation programs work to foster cultural competence in teachers. Cultural competency training arose in the literature, which I will elaborate on in the following section.

Theme 3: The Need for More Social Justice and Culturally Sustaining Practices

> *On the higher level of educational work, justice really is spiritual, it seeks that every child achieve the maximum of its individual abilities. Justice is to give any human being all help that will enable him to reach his full spiritual stature, and those who serve the spirit in all ages, must give help to these energies.*
> *(Montessori, 2012, p. 233)*

White parents resist social justice work. While there is a gap in the literature about Montessori and what CSP, social justice, and racial justice actually look like in practice, it is often mentioned as a side note in a paper's implications section. Banks and Maixner (2016) explicitly discuss social justice education in an urban, charter, Montessori school. Using a social justice education framework, they find that, over three years, administrators adopted a system-wide approach to social justice work, but that parents (who were mostly White) consistently resisted it (due to color-blindness or minimizing race relevance). They conclude that combining Montessori and social justice education is possible, but that it is important to engage with it among both school and parent communities. The very existence of their paper supports the claim that although Montessori is social justice-oriented, it does not mean that it is implemented in this way.

Montessori teachers and schools should implement more culturally responsive practices. Brunold-Conesa (2019) claims that once cultural competence is internalized and executed, it complements the Montessori teacher's role as facilitator of learning in a student-centered learning environment. The author outlines basic aspects of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP, the predecessor to CSP) according to Ladson-Billings. Brunold-Conesa found that there was external work in cultural relevance present in a particular Montessori environment, in the form of family maps and stories. Despite this work, the author found that many teachers see minority students as uncooperative, defiant, unmotivated, or in need of special education services. Debs and Brown (2017) approach this same topic from a student-centered lens. In their call for more research about the success of students of color in Montessori programs, they ask that schools implement culturally responsive and anti-bias, anti-racist practices. They claim that educators can strengthen their work with communities of color by addressing race, culture, and privilege both in classrooms and wider school communities. But what does this look like in practice, with children? I address this question in the following section.

Theme 4: Aspects of Culturally Sustaining Practices Exist in Montessori

> *This is the plan and the technique: to serve, and serve well; to serve the spirit...The child must acquire...independence of will by choosing alone and freely, independence of thought by working alone and uninterrupted...We must help the child to act by himself, will by himself, think for himself. (Montessori, 2012, p. 230)*

There is a lack of universal training around culturally sustaining practices in the Montessori community. There is very little literature about the actual practice of culturally sustaining pedagogy in Montessori education. There is a rise in discussions about educational

equity and what it looks like, with organizations such as Embracing Equity and conferences such as Montessori for Social Justice publicizing social justice and its intersection with Montessori. There is some information about culturally sustaining practices in early childhood settings and its importance in cultivating respect, confidence, interpersonal competence, and self-regulation in young children (Doucet, 2019). Doucet suggests that educators make six commitments for culturally sustaining early childhood environments: increasing diversity knowledge, building classrooms as a community of trust, involving families and communities in education, combatting prejudice and discrimination, addressing diversity in its full complexity, and promoting global perspectives. In AMI Montessori training, the idea of the classroom as a community is a significant part of the Montessori model. In a primary environment, the children learn social behaviors through grace and courtesy lessons, and learn to live and be together in their work, care of the environment, and play. In an elementary environment, group work takes up most of children's time as they continue to build relationships and learn to navigate social situations. Global perspectives are partially taken into account through the creation of cultural folders in the primary environment. Montessori teachers-in-training must create folders for each continent representing various themes such as animals, nature, people, and transportation. As for the other five commitments proposed by Doucet, there are no universally tangible (or intangible) teachings that *all* Montessori teachers learn. Many of the commitments Doucet proposes above are school- or teacher-specific. Thus, the Montessori community as a whole is not unified in implementation of culturally sustaining practices and its role in Montessori training.

Culturally sustaining practices and anti-bias work are never finished. Geneva Gay (2010) also shares methods for being culturally sustaining: empowering students to improve decision-making; building a sense of community among students; cooperative learning, learning

by doing, and modeling; offering choice and authenticity; making knowledge accessible; pairing knowledge with practice; deconstructing assumptions about teaching students of color; and supporting interpersonal relationships. In addition to building community, Montessori training supports decision-making skills (by offering authentic choices) and encourages collaboration and cooperative learning. It is in its nature hands-on (which makes knowledge accessible and pairs it with practice), emphasizes teacher modeling, and supports harmonious interpersonal relationships (through social behavior instruction, or Grace and Courtesy lessons). However, there are gaps in the training when using Gay's methods as well. There is no explicit discussion in AMI training about deconstructing assumptions about students of color. Although there is great discussion about scientific observation and how to observe without judgment or bias, the moments in the classroom where teachers are most likely to act out of bias are unlikely to be when the adult is seated calmly in a chair, taking notes. Both Gay and Doucet (2019) encourage educators to remain curious about this work and emphasize that the work of culturally sustaining teaching practices is never done.

Recommendations for Teacher Preparation

> *The real preparation for education is a study of one's self. The training of the teacher who is to help life is something far more than the learning of ideas. It includes the training of character, it is a preparation of the spirit. (Montessori, 2012)*

Schools Should Explicitly Move Toward Culturally Sustaining Practices

Although there is little research about actual, culturally sustaining practices in early childhood education, current literature makes recommendations for schools and teacher preparation programs. Institutions must know how they are supporting teachers in their culturally

sustaining practices with tools that address various topics in "diversity"[1] (Durden et al., 2015). Schools could engage in attributional retraining, which addresses negative assessments and deficit perspectives held by teachers (Thomas-Alexander & Harper, 2017). Curricula must account for the complexities of urban schools, and programs using mentor teachers should ensure that those mentor teachers are supervised (Thomas-Alexander & Harper, 2017). One of the positive, consistent aspects about Montessori education is that there is a set of learning materials that is used universally and internationally. However, the attitudes of adults toward the children who teach themselves using these materials are part of the curriculum (as interactions and the classroom climate contribute to the functioning and feeling of the environment). The interactions between adults and children must account for the complexities of urban schools and the children that are served. This includes the need for schools to address institutional racism through their policies, school climate, and interpersonal interactions (Brown & Steele, 2015).

Adults Have Internal Work to Do

Many researchers acknowledge the challenges teachers (Montessori and otherwise) face in social justice education and make recommendations for teacher preparation to include race reflection and social justice work. One paper found that teachers want to practice social justice in their pedagogy, but often find a disconnect between ideas and practice (Agarwal et al, 2010). Various articles suggest conversation and reflection to support teachers' views of social justice. Teachers must be conscious of their own multiple identities and engage in practices to support cultural competence (Durden, Escalante, & Blitch, 2015; Brown & Steele, 2015): future teachers should hear and discuss counter-narratives of people of color and read about cultural patterns of

[1] Often, "diversity" is a term that centers whiteness and refers only to the visual representation or existence of people of color, rather than encompassing the systems and practices that must exist to support them. Here, more accurate terms might be equity or racial justice.

language and behavior (Nash & Miller, 2015). Teacher educators should provide discursive tools to future teachers in order to disrupt their constructions of whiteness and racial discourse (Nash & Miller, 2015). Martin (2014) suggests that White teachers (specifically) should find themselves in discussions about race, and note the influence of their upbringings on their ideas of being White. Clearly, there is much internal work to be done on the part of the individual. This internal work meshes well with the Montessori principle of the preparation of the adult.

Across the research, and across groups (conventional educators, Montessori advocates, and educational organizations), scholars emphasize the importance of the internal work that adults who work with children must do to provide them with a humanizing and culturally sustaining education. Although Montessori training does include an aspect of spiritual preparation, there is no universal discussion about race reflection and the internal work required to mitigate bias in one's own practice. AMI trainer Ginny Sackett (2013) writes that working with children is what completes a Montessori teacher's training, preparation, and transformation. The combination of the ongoing work of culturally sustaining practices and anti-bias work, and time spent working with the children, is what will lead to a more humanizing implementation of the Montessori method.

All Montessori Training Should Include Culturally Sustaining Practices

The idea of spiritual preparation is a stalwart part of training, in which trainers also emphasize physical and intellectual preparation. In fact, preparation is revered among Montessori practitioners. Although some of this preparation is visible and tangible, much of it is internal. Montessori trainers and teachers are not the only ones emphasizing the importance of the adult's internal work. Student teachers should have opportunities to practice reflective thinking, engage in self-work, "and then be willing to look ourselves in the mirror and start the

work toward becoming" (Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, and Sonu, 2010; Fujiyoshi, 2015). Brunold-Conesa, in an explicit discussion of CSP as it relates to Montessori, implores teachers to cultivate and internalize aspects of CSP (2019). Montessori schools and teacher preparations should support this work, fostering cultural competency and supporting teachers' internal work (Brown and Steele, 2015).

Limitations and Future Research

Through an exploration of the current literature, I summarized research about: the racial and economic challenges facing public Montessori in the U.S.; the varied experiences of Montessori students of color; the need for more social justice and culturally sustaining practices; and the aspects of culturally sustaining practices already existing in Montessori. From looking at this research, we see a significant gap in the literature about the technical implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogical practices in public Montessori settings. There is neither a set of practices specifically for a Montessori context, nor substantial research about Montessori adults of color who already engage in culturally sustaining practices. Although there are calls for teachers to do internal reflection, there is not much guidance on what this can look like as it relates to Montessori teachers. If, as Sackett (2013) writes, race reflection is meant to go hand-in-hand with practice, then schools might build in time during the day to prioritize this aspect of teaching. Without knowing best culturally sustaining practices, are we doing more harm than good to the very children we seek to empower?

Due to the lack of research existing about culturally sustaining practices and how they are used in Montessori practice and training, one of the limitations of this paper was the limited amount of published work about the subject. Additionally, the lack of research about Montessori educators of color leaves questions about educators who may be engaging in culturally

sustaining practices. There is no doubt that many Montessori educators around the United States are engaging in humanizing, uplifting, and liberating work with children; however, this work is not publicly known.

As public Montessori continues to spread in the United States, it is poised to be a strong tool for liberation for people of color. Future research should examine best practices of Montessori practitioners who engage in culturally sustaining practices, focusing explicitly on Montessori educators of color (a group often left out of the conversation). Examining their successful teaching moments and interactions might guide other practitioners' thoughts about what it can mean to practice the Montessori method in a culturally sustaining way. Another future research topic could be the spiritual preparation of the adult as it relates to race reflection, especially since this work needs to be universally acknowledged and accessible in all Montessori training. Finally, using a critical lens to examine how culturally sustaining practices can be used in harmony with the Montessori method will shed light on how to empower all of its participants, adults and children alike.

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