

How Montessori Educators in the U.S. Address
Culturally Responsive Teaching

A Field Study submitted to the faculty of
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by
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I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this field study.

Dr. Josephine Arce, Associate Professor

Date

Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read How Montessori Educators in the U.S. Address Culturally Responsive Education by Michelle Yezbick, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a field study submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Arts in Education: Concentration in Language and Literacy at San Francisco State University.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background:

Over one hundred years ago in Italy, Dr. Maria Montessori developed a radically different approach to education informed by scientific observation rather than preexisting models of schooling. A recent graduate of the medical school at the University of Rome, Dr. Montessori drew the world's attention when in 1901 the group of children with which she worked scored high marks on Rome's standardized student achievement test. What was especially remarkable about this accomplishment was that these children had been previously thought of as uneducable due to developmental disabilities. After working with Dr. Montessori's curriculum and the materials she developed, her students scored higher than non-disabled students educated in Rome's public schools (Lillard, 2005).

In Montessori's time, a trend toward structuring schools based on the factory model was in full swing with changes in European society's values brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Today, these same models persist in our traditional approaches to education (McLaren, 1994). As a scientist, Dr. Montessori pared away influences other than what could be observed as she developed her didactic materials and curriculum (Montessori, 1917/1965). Her classrooms looked radically different from others. Today, many mainstream classrooms reveal her influences: multi-age classes are common, performance assessments are used, individualized instruction is a goal, and group work is implemented. However, these changes do not reflect a fundamental restructuring of the approach to education in most cases; the differences between Montessori education and mainstream education are still vivid. These differences account for much of the success of the program, but are they enough to equalize the access for all learners in a contemporary, multicultural society?

One hundred years after Maria Montessori studied the needs of the children she worked with, I look at the children in my own classroom. Their family backgrounds represent socioeconomic backgrounds ranging from poverty level to upper-middle class. Their home languages include Spanish, Mandarin, Tongan, Arabic, Hindi, and African American English. Informed by their families' home cultures, their expectations of the school experience, their roles

as students, and my role as their teacher, vary widely. I question whether the method developed so long ago and far away for a very different group of children can be the best for my students today.

Yet, so much of what Dr. Montessori developed resonates as timeless and universal: instruction should reflect that each child has been considered as an individual, concepts should be presented from the concrete to the abstract, manipulatives and visual aids should accompany learning new concepts whenever possible, storytelling and social interaction are invaluable in the classroom...and so much more (Montessori, 1912/1964). I am cautioned, however, to consider that there is still me, the teacher, with my own cultural lens, interpreting and implementing this work of Dr. Montessori.

Three years ago I heard and saw resistance in an audience at a Montessori teachers' conference to the idea proposed by Dr. Marlene Barron: even Montessori teachers can cause their students harm when they do not consider the ways in which culture is displayed in our classrooms. Conference attendees responded to this suggestion with opposition; they commented that the Montessori approach was for all children, that their classrooms offered every child an equal chance to succeed.

I was not surprised by the conflict expressed in the room that day. The refusal of educators from the dominant cultural background to acknowledge unjust power relations in American classrooms has been well documented by Delpit (1986, 1988, 1995). I could also understand the feeling of loyalty to an educational approach that was so beloved and successful for over a century. But I knew that the issue of culture in American Montessori classrooms was neither simple nor insignificant, and I wanted to explore it more.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to determine how other Montessori educators address issues of culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms. Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively.” (p. 106). Using a dialogue-inquiry approach (Freire & Shor, 1987) will allow participants in the study, six Montessori educators including myself, to reflect on understandings of how the traditional Montessori approach to education serves students from diverse language and cultural

backgrounds. Together, we will have a chance to examine what we know, what we think we know, and what we need to know about our teaching and our students.

The goal of such an approach is not only to learn, but to transform the participants, myself included. The process must include praxis, or action that is taken as a result of the dialogue (Freire, 1970). For teachers, this means new instructional strategies could be attempted which may range in form from a shift in the nature of the language used in the classroom, or the expression of power, or the feedback given to children about their cultural displays. The results of these actions will be brought back to the group members to consider together what was done and what should be done to better serve our students and understand ourselves as teachers.

Research Significance:

In general, Montessori educators evolve their pedagogy by sharing qualitative research findings through a network of conferences and publications available to members of the American Montessori Society (AMS) and the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) (Chattin-McNichols, 2001; Vaughn, 2002). This can make it difficult to access these findings outside of these networks. Currently, there is little research easily available on the topic of culturally relevant pedagogy and Montessori education. There have been program descriptions of culturally responsive Montessori schools serving communities in Ghana (Iddi-Gubbels, 2006), in Korea (Lee, 1995), in California with migrant families (Lopez, 1992), in Arizona with Ute Indians (Oberly, 2002), in Hawaii with children from indigenous backgrounds (Schonleber, 2006) and around the world in various homogenous populations (Spodek & Saracho, 1996). There is also literature on ways in which Montessori programs address multicultural needs and ways to improve pedagogy within Montessori programs to do so (Coe, 1998; De Los Santos, 1989; Hilliard, 1996; Hilliard, 1998; Scott, 2002; Turner, 2000; Van Groenou, 1995). However, there appears to be a dearth of literature available that examines the perspectives of Montessori teachers in pluralistic classrooms such as those found in many schools in the United States.

In countries around the world, Montessori schools continue to foster success for students. In most of these countries, the culture of the teacher and the culture of the students is a close match. In the U.S., a pluralistic society has meant that in the classroom there often exists a cultural dissonance between groups of students and their teachers (Delpit, 1988; Hollins, 1996; Howard, 2003 & Pransky & Bailey, 2002/2003; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). Hollins (1996) describes how students who have been socialized in a home-culture that develops

learning preferences and strengths consistent with traditional school practices are at an advantage, while students from marginalized populations are potentially at a disadvantage.

The current trends in demographics indicate that the potential for this disadvantage is increasing. As students become more diverse in the public schools, less diversity is seen in the teacher population (Howard, 2003). Critical pedagogues who reject the deficit theory as a way to explain the underachievement of Children of Color, children from poverty, and children from diverse language backgrounds look to this cultural dissonance as the root of the problem (Delpit, 1988; Gay, 2004; Hollins, 1996; Howard, 2003 & Pransky & Bailey, 2002/2003; Purcell-Gates, 2002; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). There are over 250 public Montessori programs available in the U.S.; clearly there is a need for culturally responsive teaching.

The Montessori approach has been criticized, paradoxically, for being both too regimented and unchanging and too loose and open for interpretation (Chattin-McNichols, 1992; Hainstock, 1986). In the U.S., because there is no legal standard on which schools can claim themselves “Montessori” these allegations by both ends of the spectrum can likely be substantiated in some instances. For those of us teaching in public Montessori schools, the option to be regimented or unchanging is hardly a concern. Rather, we often find it a challenge to protect the authentic implementation of traditional Montessori education from demands at the district, state, and federal level.

This study focuses on the choices made by Montessori teachers in public school programs who are weighing the influence of these demands, the needs of a diverse student population, and the proven efficacy of traditional Montessori education. Because it will be participatory research design, the most direct benefits will be for the participants themselves, their students, and their communities.

Themes that emerged from this study can also expand the existing knowledge base on effective practices for not only American Montessori educators, but for all educators who strive to teach well under pressure from multiple sources. Teachers and administrators who seek to give students high quality education, but feel the weight of demands to teach to tests and implement scripted curricula, can benefit from understanding ways to resist these demands.

Finally, this study will serve the needs of educators who are looking for insight into how to evolve their practice in positive ways to be more responsive to their students’ needs. At this time in the U.S., student populations are becoming more heterogeneous while the teacher

population is becoming more homogeneous (Delpit, 1995; Howard, 2003). As teachers and administrators seek to address what Howard calls “the demographic divide”, research that explores the process of implementing culturally responsive practices is needed (2003, p.195). This study will seek to document that process for the participants involved, expanding the available knowledge base for others who wish to do so.

Research Question:

How do Montessori teachers address culturally responsive teaching in the U.S.?

CHAPTER TWO: Review of the Literature

Forming a comprehensive representation of what existing literature says of culturally responsive education and the Montessori method of education in the U.S. requires that several areas of inquiry be brought together. An understanding of what the Montessori method is must be established, as well as how it may be implemented in American classrooms. The effectiveness of these Montessori classrooms warrants investigation; a complete picture cannot be produced without considering how all students in a pluralistic community are being served, including students from diverse socioeconomic, language, and cultural backgrounds. The essence of culturally responsive education must also be extricated, and its rationale which can be found in the literature from the discipline of critical pedagogy. Finally, themes found in the Montessori method of education can be compared to themes from the literature on culturally responsive teaching to see where the two dovetail and where dissension might exist. Following is an analysis of what educational literature says of each of these areas.

The Montessori Method of Education

The first Montessori classroom opened early in the twentieth century in San Lorenzo, Italy, an impoverished neighborhood of Rome. Dr. Maria Montessori had been asked to open a day care in a government-funded housing project for fifty young children, ages three through six, who were left without supervision during the day while their parents worked. Her preceding work with developmentally disabled children, an assignment she received after graduating with a medical degree from the University of Rome, had already brought her acclaim. The children from the institution had passed exams designed for schoolchildren from the regular education programs in Rome's public schools, some of Dr. Montessori's students even managed to outperform the "normal" children (Hainstock, 1986; Lillard, 2005). Montessori's experiences with these children kindled an interest in human learning and she returned to school to study education.

Montessori was also well known for being outspoken on issues of social reform in a time and place where women were not expected to be politically active; she was a controversial but popular lecturer. She had developed a dogged determination for pursuing avenues that were

conventionally closed to women, her achievement of attaining a medical degree and physician's license was a first for any woman in Italy. Prior to enrollment in medical schools, Montessori had studied engineering, another field not traditionally pursued by women. The San Lorenzo project seemed an intersection of her interest in discovering more about human nature and learning and her interest in social reform and the *Casa dei Bambini*, or "Children's House" was opened in January of 1907 (Montessori, 2004; Hainstock, 1986).

Dr. Montessori had studied the work of Jean-Luc-Gaspard Itard, a French physician and predecessor to Montessori who is most well known for his work with the "Wild Boy of Aveyon". From Itard, Montessori took the importance of developing the mind through sensorial experiences. She also followed the work of Edouard Seguin, a student of Itard who is referred to as the father of modern special education, and whose work stressed the importance of isolating one new concept or level of difficulty (Montessori, 2004). From Jean-Jacques Rousseau she took the importance of individualizing curricula as well as moving from the concrete to the abstract. Another influence to her work was the German Friedrich Froebel, from whom we have the metaphor of the school as a garden and the term *kindergarten* (Hainstock, 1986). Although informed by the work of all of these, Montessori relied primarily on direct scientific observation of children to inform her theories on education (Montessori, 1936).

She discovered early on that the environment was critically important to the development of the young children of the *Casa*. Dr. Montessori concluded that the primary drive of the young child was to form oneself, as a member of one's culture, by interacting with one's environment. She stated:

And so we discovered that education is not something that the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. (1967, p. 21).

A carefully prepared environment would aid the child in this endeavor by removing obstacles, such as tall shelves, heavy furniture, and interfering adults, and providing opportunities for what Montessori called "auto-education". The principal of auto-education was simply that with freedom of movement, children could select their own learning activities from the prepared environment (Montessori, 2004). They might choose to observe or care for plants or animals or

use one of the specially designed sensorial or practical life materials; in the elementary environment children could choose work from areas arranged by subject: language arts, mathematics, science, history, art, music and so forth (Lillard, 1996).

The fifty children from the original San Lorenzo *Casa* needed to be fed twice daily, bathed, and helped to dress themselves. Out of necessity as well as honoring the children's interest to do so, Montessori enlisted the help of the older children. Child-sized household implements such as brooms, dustpans, and sponges, as well as laces and buttoning cloths mounted on boards appeared in the *Casa* for the children to practice "Practical Life" skills. Dr. Montessori had constructed for the children a wide variety of these items and watched as they demonstrated their abilities to sustain long periods of concentration as they worked. She added to the environment some of the manipulative learning devices she had developed for working with the children from the institution designed to enhance their perceptual skills, devices that would come to be called "Sensorial" materials. Instruction was limited to demonstration of how to use the materials as well as "Grace and Courtesy" lessons, applauded by the children, for such skills as how to use a handkerchief and how give a greeting with good manners.

The *Casa* children, too young to attend public school, expressed interest in learning to read, write, use numbers, and understand science and history. Materials were developed and refined through observation of their usage to accomplish all of these. Dr. Montessori's designs were guided by her beliefs that the materials should be easy for the children to use independently, attractively made from natural materials, and self-correcting. Order in the environment was another tenet of her method introduced early on and each material was housed in low, accessible shelves within a progression of levels of difficulty.

As Dr. Montessori observed the young children, she noticed their tendency towards "sensitive periods".

These periods correspond to special sensibilities to be found in creatures in process of development; they are transitory, and confined to the acquisition of a determined characteristic. Once this characteristic has evolved, the corresponding sensibility disappears. Thus every characteristic is established by the help of an impulse, of a transient sensibility which lasts over a limited period of growth, that is, during the corresponding sensitive period. (1936, p.36).

Montessori wrote extensively on the sensitive period for language and described its innateness in human beings years before Noam Chomsky suggested the theory (Lillard, 2005). She referred to

this period of child development, from birth to three years as the time of the “Absorbent Mind” when sensorial input was collected (Lillard, 1996; Montessori, 1967). The sensitive periods observed in the three to six years were concerned with organizing this input. Her awareness of these sensitive periods intensified Dr. Montessori’s belief that teachers must observe their students to pinpoint the optimal time to introduce lessons and materials.

The elementary materials, philosophies, and method grew out of the foundation laid for the preschool. Again, Montessori made scientific observation of the children, now aged six to nine. She noted that they were much more social and needed opportunities to work together as opposed to the earlier years when they preferred to work independently or independently and alongside one another. The children were capable of more abstract thought and use of materials changed, although they still progressed in levels of difficulty with one new concept or challenge being isolated at each progression. Choice of work and work space and freedom of movement remained important, as did independence, multi-age grouping, and care for the environment (Chattin-McNichols, 1992; Lillard, 1996).

Another prominent theme in Dr. Montessori’s work was the idea that education be a vehicle for world peace. Exiled in 1934 from Italy by Mussolini for refusing to allow her schools to be training grounds for young fascists, Montessori moved to Barcelona, where she was forced to flee again, this time to the Netherlands, in 1936 when the Spanish Civil War broke out (NAMTA, 1996). In a series of lectures delivered in Europe in the 1930s, Dr. Montessori explained her thoughts on the relationship between education and peace. The failure to achieve peace, she maintained, was a result of human frustration in achieving peace at a personal level. Socialization in an environment ill-suited to nurture the human potential was thought to be at the root of the problem (Montessori, 1949/194). For her work on peace through education, Montessori was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times, in 1949, 1950, and 1951.

Montessori Schools in the United States

In the United States, the Montessori approach to education was first received with great enthusiasm in the early 1900s, then disappeared as a result of criticism and political and economic factors, but has grown in popularity since its reintroduction in the early sixties. When Dr. Montessori was first receiving world acclaim, the United States was one of many countries that took to the method and schools were opened from New York to California. The decline followed criticism from high profile progressives such as the then president of Columbia

Teachers College, William Heard Kilpatrick, and John Dewey, who both felt that the method was too regimented and lacked sufficient opportunities for socializing. Lillard (2005) points out that a review of Kilpatrick's critique reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of her work probably resulting from only cursory observations of Montessori classrooms.

In the case of Dewey, much of his disapproval stemmed from what he felt was an introduction of academic material at too young an age. He felt that teaching a child to read before the age of eight would be damaging to the development of the intellect, an idea we now would find absurd. Dewey was also concerned about the lack of socializing damaging the children's ability to bond as a community and develop a notion of citizenship, principles he fervently stood for. However, recent research does not support this contention, but rather the opposite. Montessori students report feeling a stronger sense of community than their counterparts and can be observed engaging in more positive social behaviors at school (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006). Despite their influential criticism, both Kilpatrick and Dewey praised the ideas of respecting the child's ability to choose, the freedom of movement the students were allowed, and the use of concrete materials.

Another factor leading to the loss of momentum of the Montessori approach in the U.S. was Dr. Montessori's own stubbornness and need for control (Chaitin-McNichols, 1992; Hainstock, 1986). While it would be impossible for any one individual to manage schools and teacher training centers in Europe, India, Africa, and the United States, it seemed Montessori's intention to do so. When Alexander Graham Bell and his wife, Mabel Hubbard Bell, opened a school and training center for Montessori teachers in Washington D.C., Dr. Montessori became furious that she had not been personally consulted (Hainstock, 1986).

Lillard (2005) also cites political and economic factors as contributing to the demise of the first wave of the Montessori movement in America. In times of economic and political crises, such as those experienced during the Great Depression and the era of McCarthyism and the Cold War there is a tendency to take comfort in the familiar and abandon progressive approaches to education.

In the 1960s, a resurgence of interest led to the opening of Montessori schools in the U.S. again. Much of this is credited to the work of educator Nancy McCormick Rambush, founder of the American Montessori Society (Hainstock, 1986). In the early seventies, "magnet schools" were emerging on the public school scene as an answer to the need to desegregate urban schools

alternative to bussing (Kahn, 1990). At the same time, the Montessori model was being implemented in Head Start and other government-funded programs as part of the “war on poverty” movement. Early successful attempts with Montessori magnet schools caused a growth rate of 500 percent during the eighties. There are now between 250 and 300 public Montessori schools in existence nationwide (Matthews, 2007).

Today, there are thousands of Montessori schools in operation in the United States with programs serving infants up through young adults in high school. At least 250 of these are public schools with enrollment representing a range of socioeconomic and class backgrounds as well as diverse language, racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Matthews, 2007). The effectiveness of the method with different populations has been documented. Most recently, a study published in *Science* magazine by psychologists Angeline Lillard and Nicole Else-Quest recognized the success of the program for students in Milwaukee’s public Montessori program, which serves primarily African American students (September 29, 2006). Three years prior, similar results were found for the same schools, also with methods ensuring comparison with a control group of non-Montessori students with similar ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Dohrmann, 2003).

In 2001, Chattin-McNichols presented a comprehensive examination of the research on Montessori education in the U.S. including more than 200 studies that looked at process and those that reviewed outcomes. Studies included those that looked at children in Montessori preschools, children who had attended Montessori preschools and were enrolled in elementary schools, and children in elementary schools. Montessori preschool programs were found to perform as well as other preschool programs in most areas pertaining to school readiness and intelligence, but the effects were longer lasting than other preschool programs. Programs other than Montessori showed higher gains for students in areas of vocabulary recognition and verbal-social participation. Areas in which the Montessori program outcomes outperformed other programs in preschool and in elementary included: attentional strategies, general intelligence, achievement in academic areas, and maintaining these gains. Limitations of the research reported by Chattin-McNichols included small sample size, confounding teacher and method by using a single teacher, confounding for parent selection of program, and many short term rather than longitudinal designs.

Lillard (2005) found many similar limitations in the more recent research. Lillard, a psychologist, recognized the many difficulties in maintaining a true experimental design when conducting research on education. In her 2006 article coauthored with Else-Quest, the confound for parental selection was eliminated by using only children who had been entered into the school lottery by their parents. Children in the control group were those who were not randomly selected to attend the Montessori program and were enrolled instead in other programs in the district, 27 in the inner city and 12 in the suburbs. The Montessori program is located in the inner city.

Children were evaluated at the end of kindergarten and again at the end of fifth grade. By the end of kindergarten, children in the Montessori program had higher outcomes for reading, math, social cognition, executive control, and concern for fairness and justice. Observations on the playground revealed more positive interactions for Montessori kindergartners. At the end of elementary school, Montessori students were writing more creative essays with more complex sentence structures, chose more positive responses to social dilemmas in a testing situation, and reported feeling more of a sense of community at their school.

Overall, the outcome research for student achievement at Montessori schools in the U.S. looks quite positive. Children from diverse backgrounds from a variety of programs are experiencing success in preschool and elementary school settings. Whether these successes can be attributed to the pedagogy of the Montessori method, or the particular ways it is implemented in these settings is a compelling uncertainty.

Culturally Responsive Education

“To aid life, leaving it free, however, to unfold itself, that is the basic task of the educator.” (1967, p. 3). This quote from Maria Montessori reveals the essence of what many educational professionals feel is the purpose for education. Situated in a democracy, American teachers have also to consider the task of preparing students to be responsible and informed citizens who will be empowered to critically problem solve and maintain an egalitarian society (Barron, 1992; Barron, 2002; Gay, 2004; Giroux, 1994; Giroux, 2000; Hilliard, 1991/1992). The field of critical pedagogy seeks to safeguard this task by revealing cultural and educational trends that would sabotage it. From Giroux, we have this warning:

Evoking the racially coded language and images of national unity, conservative groups have attempted to dismantle the progressive elements of racial politics by advocating

standardized testing in public schools, attacking multiculturalism as a threat to “common culture,” and deploying cultural pluralism as a slogan which displays difference without mentioning dominant relations of power and class oppression. (1994, p.39).

Delpit (1988) and Meacham (2002) describe the opposition faced by teachers of Color and students of Color in teacher preparation programs when they voice their views on education. Ladson-Billings (2001) notes that these displays of resistance to change in the status quo stem from several factors: those who have been served well by existing power paradigms may not wish for them to change, change can be hard work and educators work hard already, and many educators do not see flaws in the educational system but rather attribute failures to problems with the students who are failing. Lewis (2003) observed the maintenance of the status quo in schools in which well meaning teachers revealed influence from these factors. Hollins (1996) describes the “Type I” teacher as one who might express this resistance to a need for change and who would seek to explain poor outcomes for students by locating the problem within the learner.

Educators of this type are those who believe in the myth of deficit perspective or deficit theory. Deficit theory seeks to defend educational practices held as universalistic from criticism by accounting for differential results with notions of deprivation, disadvantage, and dysfunction found in students’ home lives, communities, and cultural backgrounds (Hollins, 1996; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Pransky & Bailey, 2002/2003; Purcell-Gates, 2002; Volk & Long, 2005). A prerequisite for implementing culturally responsive teaching is that the deficit perspective be rejected. Once that has been accomplished, teachers are free to rethink pedagogical practices to find the true cause of outcome differences.

Much of the literature on culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy supports the proposal that reforms must be made in teacher preparation programs. Howard (2003) asserts that teachers need explicit training on how to be an ongoing reflective practitioner as a part of teacher preparation. To ensure that this reflection leads to culturally responsive teaching, teacher education faculty members must be able to address the complexities of race, ethnicity and culture. They must be competent in their abilities to guide future teachers to see that the work of teaching is not a neutral act and one’s own beliefs need to be carefully examined. Gay (2002) acknowledges the complexity of this work of preparing teachers, noting that future teachers need a thorough knowledge of the cultures of ethnic groups, how these affect

learning behaviors, and how classroom interactions and instruction should be modified. For teachers who are already in the classroom, Tucker et. al.(2005) found positive results for attendees to a workshop designed to teach effective practices with diverse student groups.

Another prominent theme in the literature regarding culturally responsive teaching is the petition to hold high standards for all learners. As a natural counter to the deficit perspective, knowing that all students who receive appropriate instruction are capable of achieving is a requirement of effective and equitable pedagogy. Delpit (2006) maintains that teachers must teach more content to poor, urban children so that they may have comparable knowledge bases to middle-class children. Any temptation to remediate instruction by slowing down must be resisted. Ladson-Billings (2001) contrasts teachers who give “permission to fail” by not holding high expectations with teachers who use cultural strengths and creative approaches to see that students do achieve. Purcell-Gates (2002) created a similar contrast and illustrated the ways in which students’ home dialects may trigger some teachers to expect less.

Once teachers have dismissed the deficit theory and embraced the commitment to hold all learners to high expectations, they must contemplate what they know about their students’ home cultures. As stated earlier, it is ideal that teachers be assisted with developing their cultural knowledge base in their teacher preparation courses. However, if this has not happened, caring teachers can still seek out and access for themselves this information. Enlisting the help of families by creating partnerships can be one way to learn more about how race, ethnicity, and culture should be addressed in the classroom (Clifford, 1990; Cummins, 1993; Espinosa, 2005; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003).

Teachers are cautioned to avoid creating reductive notions about racial and ethnic groups (Espinosa, 2005; Howard, 2003). As a respect for the complexities of human beings, acknowledgment that there will be a wide array of differences within groups must be in place. What a teacher learns is true for one family cannot be assumed to be true for all families from similar racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. Although this does create a paradox when seeking to learn about commonalities that might be shared, it is one that teachers must be willing to grapple with in order to avoid dehumanizing the children and families with whom they work.

With a cultural knowledge base, teachers can plan and implement culturally responsive teaching. This will include consideration of content, the “what” of teaching, and delivery, or the “how” of teaching. Planning student work, how the mastery of the content will be attained and

demonstrated, must also be taken into account, as well as assessment of the work. A culturally responsive teacher will also reflect upon how the physical space in which the learning will take place will be used.

The content of learning has been given much attention by education professionals. Gay (2002) frames content in terms of curricula that encompasses “formal plans” for instruction described as content that is sanctioned by policy and governing bodies and “symbolic curriculum” which includes images, symbols, and other artifacts found in the physical environment at school as well as celebrations, awards and mottos students encounter. Teachers also need to bear in mind the “societal curriculum”, which includes content taught to students through mass media, for what it brings to the school climate and the thinking of learners.

The formal plans students encounter in school include the “standards” adopted at national, state, and local levels. They are what publishing companies seek to include in their textbooks and instructional materials. To improve their cultural relevance, they must be carefully examined for what they include and what they fail to include (Gay, 2002; Hilliard, 1991/1992; Hollins, 1996). Although progress has been made in terms of removing stereotypic images of racial and ethnic groups, as a result of the political action of communities who have demanded it, equitable representation of all groups has not yet been realized in mainstream curricula (Gay, 2004).

In the meantime, teachers must seek to augment these materials that merely add tokens to ensure that all students experience school as an affirming and validating environment. Negative trends of omission must be reversed by addressing controversy and relating the achievements of women and of collective groups rather than simply the same well known individuals from history. Cummins (1993) examines successful pedagogy for marginalized students, and describes failure as “a function of the extent to which schools reflect or counteract power relations that exist within broader society” (p. 116). Critical examination and restructuring of the formal plans and materials of education is a very concrete, although certainly just one, facet of this work of counteracting existing power relations. Involving students in evaluating these materials to identify where they are lacking can be a powerful experience in cultivating critical thinking.

Being a culturally responsive teacher means seeking to connect the knowledge base children bring, what Moll et. al. (1992) calls “funds of knowledge”, to new content introduced in

school. Seeing the need to create this connection is a critical step in realizing equitable education for all learners. While some children come to school informed by the dominant culture, already primed for success by their home-culture, others need teachers to create the link from their home-cultures to school-culture to avoid the cultural dissonance that has put some learners at a disadvantage (Delpit, 2006; Espinosa, 2005; Gay, 2002; Hollins, 1996; Lewis, 2003; Moll et. al., 1992; Pransky & Bailey, 2002/2003; Purcell-Gates, 2002; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). Making these connections requires teachers to know their students and their lives outside of school.

Included in the formal plans for content to teach are the literacy skills all students need to access status and power in society. This has been an area of considerable debate in education as a balance is sought between skills instruction and process approaches (Delpit, 1988, 1995; Reyes, 1992). Effective teachers of students from diverse language backgrounds know that their students do not come to school with these skills being taught and modeled at home. They put the needs of their students before the demands of the latest trend in literacy education and maintain goals of liberating students from instructional dependence (Cummins, 1993). They also know that the language and literacy experiences that they do come to school with are valuable and equally worthy as those of the children from the dominant culture's (Volk & Long, 2005). As in other areas of curricula, culturally responsive teachers seek to utilize students' strengths to teach literacy skills.

Methods used to accomplish this include the culturally responsive teacher's instructional strategies, lesson designs, language usage, and displays of power in the classroom. Using contrastive analysis, or codeswitching, to teach literacy skills is one example of a culturally relevant instructional strategy (Delpit, 1988, 2002; Wheeler & Swords, 2004). With this approach, students' home languages are honored as valid means of expression while they are compared to the dominant culture's language of power: formal or academic English. Students engage in activities of translation from one to the other to strengthen their understanding and appreciation of both. Inviting and encouraging primary language development in an academic setting has been shown to have a reciprocal relationship with formal English language development (Cummins, 1989).

Incorporating music, drama, and the arts into lesson designs is another method that can be used to capitalize on learners' strengths (Delpit, 2006; Espinosa, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2001;

Volk & Long, 2005). Allowing for collaboration in group work, rather than relying solely on traditional expectations for individual work in school can be a culturally relevant method of literacy instruction. Collaborative approaches affirm cooperation as equally valid to independence in problem solving and accomplishing tasks (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Alvarez, 2001). They also build a classroom community where academic accomplishment is a shared responsibility in which all learners can invest (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003).

Understanding communication styles when designing lessons is an important consideration for effective instruction of children from diverse backgrounds. Teachers' cultural knowledge bases should include understanding the ways in which culture informs sensitivities towards directives from teachers, interpretations of displays of power, and comfort levels with different discourse styles. For example, Delpit (1988) describes how indirect power displays from a White, middle class teacher may not elicit response from an African American child who is familiar with an oral style that is more direct from adults in her or his community. Pransky and Bailey (2002/2003) describe a lesson that was not effective with Cambodian children because they were asked to do something they were not comfortable with: critique adults (teachers) who were role-playing a scene in which they portrayed students acting inappropriately. Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke (2003) relate a misunderstanding between a teacher and a Vietnamese student that occurs because the teacher does not know that "da", the literal equivalent of "yes" means also "I am politely listening to you". Delpit (1995) describes how Native American students were uncomfortable with assignments in which they were to write summaries as it entails taking ideas from someone and putting them in your own words. In their culture, it is rude to speak for another person.

With content, design, and delivery considered there is still the physical space in which the learning will take place that is a factor. Gay (2002) describes the "symbolic curriculum" as including images, symbols, icons, mottoes and the content of school classroom and walls. How this space is used is reflective of the values of the teacher, parents, administrators, or students who are given access to it. Culturally responsive teachers seek to affirm students' identities with symbolic curriculum (Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). Involving students in decisions such as how the chairs and furniture should be arranged to best facilitate learning can create a shared authority in the classroom to promote student empowerment (Shor, 1996). The

message of respect sent to students that they are worthy of a clean, well-maintained, orderly space in which their identities are affirmed is one all students deserve. McLaren (1994) and Kohl (1967) described classrooms in their teaching experiences with poor, marginalized students where furniture and windows were in disrepair and no attempts had been made to enhance the environment. The message had been sent to the students that they were not valued and not worth the effort of providing a nurturing learning space.

Finally, the role of assessment needs to be considered carefully for the culturally responsive teacher. Traditional standardized tests have been found to be problematic for many groups of students. Fleming and Garica (1998) found that they are not valid measures of what African Americans can accomplish in actual educational settings. Meier (1994) concurs, and describes many other problematic features including class, gender, and cultural biases. Mohan (1992) reveals cultural bias found in the reading comprehension sections of standardized tests. Garcia (2001) cites similar findings for standardized intelligence tests, warning that they do not reflect an adequate understanding of the mind in their design although they claim to measure its capabilities.

Fortunately, alternative authentic forms of assessment can be implemented to give teachers a more accurate picture of students' learning and capabilities. Observations, anecdotal notes and narrative records, and conferences with students are methods that give more information about student outcomes than traditional tests (Genesee & Hamayan, 2001; Miramontes, Nadeau & Commins, 1997; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Portfolios are another assessment technique that invites the learner into the process when students self-select work. An additional benefit is the cultivation of metacognition that occurs when students reflect on their learning (Genesee & Hamayan, 2001; Miramontes, Nadeau & Commins, 1997; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Student journals and dialogue journals can be used to show growth over time while at the same time developing writing skill (Genesee & Hamayan, 2001; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996) Genesee & Hamayan (2001) describe "classroom-based assessment" in which assessments are carefully planned with instructional plans and student performance informs both.

Many components of culturally responsive pedagogy have been described here, from rejecting the status quo and deficit theories to maintaining high expectations and expanding one's cultural knowledge base while creating partnerships with students' communities and

families. Valuing students' home languages and literacies, designing culturally responsive lessons and assessment, critically evaluating content, and thoughtfully planning the physical environment all merit attention. However, to effectively implement these elements into teaching that will reach the students, a caring educator who shows genuine regard for the students must be at the source. Teachers such as those described by Ladson-Billings (1994) and Delpit (2006) make the students their own and create classroom communities. They give of themselves and make personal investments. When Anonia Darder reflected on her work and friendship with Paulo Friere, she described his commitment to love in education, what he would call an armed love, a fighting love, "a love that could be lively, forceful, and inspiring, while at the same time, critical, challenging and insistent" (Darder, 1998, p.2). It is only from the energy generated from this love that an authentic culturally responsive pedagogy can evolve.

The Intersection Between the Montessori Method of Education and Culturally Responsive Education in the U.S.

Hilliard (1996) writes: "The Montessori method as I understand it is a human metaphor, not a mechanical, medical, or architectural metaphor. That's why I argue for maintaining this metaphor." (p. 122). Themes in the Montessori method do exist that seem to suggest it will lend itself to culturally responsive teaching. To begin with, in order to implement culturally responsive education, a teacher must know the students and have an understanding of their backgrounds. Montessori encouraged teachers to observe their students carefully, noting when children were entering "sensitive periods" for instruction and base pedagogical decisions on these observations. She said: "In order to educate, it is essential to know those who are to be educated."

Lev Vygotsky cited Montessori's ideas on sensitive periods when describing his theory of the "zone of proximal development" (1962, pp.104-105). Vygotsky found her description of the sensitive periods in regards to language too simplistic, however, as she described them as being driven primarily by biology and did not expand on the need for social and cultural development of these skills. It is likely this interpretation was informed by the records of Montessori's dramatic public speeches in which she used metaphors of children as caterpillars who will transform into butterflies, such as described in *The Secret of Childhood* (1936). Had he delved into the drier writings of Montessori's manuals or witnessed teachers being trained, Vygotsky

would have seen that the teacher is instructed to individualize the curricula for the students, noticing and responding to where they are in their understanding and what they are ready for next. Doing so requires social and cultural interaction between teacher and student, not merely being in the “right time” (sensitive period) and the “right place” (prepared environment).

However, when observation is implemented as pedagogical practice, there is the teacher, with her or his own culturally informed biases, interpreting what is being seen. For this reason, Barron (2002) advocates for more interaction with the child while observing. The teacher should inquire about the child’s interpretation of the work they are doing and how they feel about it. This type of power sharing in the classroom can be done with even the youngest students. It shows a teacher’s interest in replacing the traditional polarity of power in the classroom in which the teacher is the authority and the student is passive. Montessori disparaged the traditional dynamic, calling instead for teachers to be positioned as guides to meaningful work. The child’s innate discipline would emerge following the satisfaction experienced from doing this work (Montessori, 1912/2002). These ideas of restructuring power in the classroom are echoed in the work of Paolo Freire (1970) and Ira Shor (1996).

Hilliard (1998) described how dialogue with the child is a necessary part of the Montessori teacher’s pedagogy:

The only way you can possibly have dialogue is to hear what children have to say. You have to hear what their cultures have to offer. You have to use the material that they are familiar with in order to go from the known to the unknown. We sometimes say that, but how can you go from the known to the unknown if we don’t know what’s known? What’s known is what is culturally salient (p. 133).

In 2002, Vaughn looked specifically at the critical perspectives shared by Freire, Shor, Giroux and other critical pedagogues, and how Montessori classrooms today reflect praxis of empowerment for students in areas of management of discipline, the nature of the environment, and the social construction of learning. In contrast to power constructs found typically in schools, Vaughn found Montessori students governing their own freedoms for the good of the learning community rather than to please the teacher, an authority figure. Critical educators such as McLaren (1994), Shor (1996), Freire (1970), and Giroux (1994) would identify this empowerment as maximizing learning potential as well as taking steps towards dismantling the stratification of society.

Furthermore, the teacher should process this information with other teachers as much as possible in dialogues with the goal of drawing conclusions together. Based on their contributions to the literature on culturally responsive teaching, it is likely that educators like Delpit, Lewis and Gay would also encourage teachers to share these findings with the students' families for another valuable dimension to understanding the children's learning (Delpit, 1988; Gay, 2002; Lewis, 2003). Quite a different insight into what is happening in the classroom can occur if the process of observation is opened up to include these elements.

When using observation as an assessment tool, it is also important to be aware of how culture is involved in a student's display of their understanding of the content. Even a Montessori classroom with its use of realia and concrete materials presents learning intended to be applied in the larger world in a decontextualized manner. A teacher who observes a child struggling to work with materials designed to teach a particular concept must first consider if that child could demonstrate understanding within a familiar context before assessing failure to master the concept. Delpit (2006) describes how as a new teacher she nearly judged a child's inability to add coins in a classroom setting as an indication that he did not understand the concept of money. She realized her mistake when she discovered he skillfully managed the family's money at the local grocery. Again, it becomes important to know the child and the child's family and cultural background; when done with this awareness, the Montessori practice of observing the child can become culturally responsive pedagogy.

Bilingual education programs are, to varying degrees, culturally responsive environments in their nature in that they acknowledge and cultivate a significant facet of a child's cultural being: language. Renton (1990) listed several aspects of Montessori education that were beneficial in a bilingual classroom setting. These included an array of developmentally appropriate concrete learning materials, the use of the three period lesson first developed by Seguin, a supportive environment that emphasized respect for the child and deemphasized correcting, multiage and multi-ability classrooms, and small group lessons. The small group lesson design allows teachers to match instruction to language development needs. Naturally, a respectful, child-centered environment has greater potential to lower what Krashen (1989) called the "affective filter", which occurs when children feel stressed and learning is hindered by emotional distraction.

The carefully designed learning materials, which are presented to the child in an order that moves from the concrete to the abstract, provide visual and sensory scaffolding for learning. Supporting English language development with hands-on, concrete experiences and materials is endorsed by researchers such as Met (2001), Miramontes, Nadeau, and Commins (1997), Peregoy and Boyle (2000), and Terrell (1989). Met describes using contextualized learning activities as effectively scaffolding the learner because they are “accessible to the students, yet cognitively engaging” (2001, p. 165). This idea meshes well with Montessori’s own philosophy of using visual and manipulative aids and isolating one new concept or level of difficulty by building on the known to support learning (Montessori 1917/1965; 2004).

Lopez (1992) describes a full-day Montessori program designed to serve English language learners from families who were migrant farm workers. The program was developed by The Foundation Center for Phenomenological Research, Inc., a not-for-profit organization that serves the migrant worker community of California. Teachers were hired from within the community and their education at local community college, delivered in their primary language, was funded by the Foundation. The Montessori curriculum and method was chosen by the Foundation Center for several reasons, including its “ability to situate itself within a variety of cultural milieus and use ‘local languages’” (Lopez, 1992, p. 219). Aspects of the Montessori approach were thought to reflect values of the community, including “education for life”, “education for peace”, independence/interdependence, care of the person, and care of the environment. Other researchers describe the compatibility of the Montessori method and bilingual education, including De Los Santos (1989), and Oberly (2002).

A group of Hawaiian language and culture-based (HLCB) educators also perceived the Montessori approach to be congruent with their community’s values and goals (Schonleber, 2006). Participants in a study at the University of Honolulu were determined to be part of the HLCB group if they were currently employed or intended to seek employment in a HLCB school. The ethnicity of the participants was not revealed, however excerpts from interviews and focus group sessions revealed use of Hawaiian language expressions translated for the researcher. The study consisted of 40 focus group participants, fifteen of whom were chosen as key informants on the basis of having classroom experience with the Montessori method. Data included interview and focus group transcripts as well as classroom observations and analyses of school documents. The fifteen informants participated in interviews and data revealed that

HLCB early childhood educators found Montessori a good fit for their values and beliefs. They supported their opinions by sharing traditional Hawaiin proverbs that reflected philosophies of the Montessori approach to education.

Buermann (1992) and Clifford (1990) described public Montessori schools that were successfully serving urban African American students. Clifford shared culturally responsive practices in place such as teachers working intensely and closely with families and literacy instruction that emphasized pronunciation, spelling, and correct and appropriate usage of academic English, while expecting and reacting appropriately to informal English, including cursing. Explicit teaching of expectations of behavior at school and lessons on grace and courtesy were also emphasized.

Summary

Although many themes in the traditional Montessori philosophy lend themselves to creating a culturally responsive classroom, they do not inherently guarantee it. As mentioned in the discussion of observation, all teachers have their own cultural lenses. The degrees to which teachers acknowledge their own cultural reference points and are aware of them when making pedagogical decisions vary. Some themes in Montessori education may be problematic if not handled with sensitivity.

To begin with, the traditional curriculum was developed in Italy by an Italian for Italian children. European oriented content and points of view naturally dominate the lessons. For a pluralistic classroom in which the teacher is seeking to affirm diverse cultural backgrounds, supplementary materials must be incorporated. When describing the schism that occurred between the European Montessori movement and the American Montessori movement, Nancy McCormick Rambusch, founder of the American Montessori Society, stated: “American Montessori education needed to be as diverse and pluralistic as America itself” (1992, p. 11). Taking the Montessori curriculum as it comes from Europe without augmentation cannot be considered culturally responsive pedagogy.

Social interaction is encouraged in a Montessori setting; children may choose to work in pairs or small groups and are free to move about the classroom and relate to one another. This can offer many opportunities for language and personal development. However, researchers like Lensmire (1994) and Henkin (1995) warn that this also creates the potential for exclusion, causing some children to become “outsiders” to the detriment of their literacy development.

These researchers observed students being ostracized by classmates on the bases of gender and race. Teachers must be aware of this possibility and actively assist children to build a community in which exclusion is unacceptable as well as addressing the issue appropriately when it does occur.

The structure of the traditional Montessori day is one that ideally has a three hour “work period” in which students are largely given the choice of what work they will do. This freedom of choice is an important tenet in the Montessori philosophy, one that Dr. Montessori directly linked with her vision of transformative and emancipatory education. She wrote:

The child who has never learned to work by himself, to set goals for his own acts, or to be the master of his own force of will is recognizable in the adult who lets others guide him and feels a constant need for the approval of others (1972, p. 20).

This freedom, however, was to be bound by reasonable limits. A well known Montessori quote is: “To give a child liberty is not to abandon him to himself.” For a Montessori teacher seeking to equitably serve all learners, this means responding appropriately when children are not thriving in the traditional work period structure. Delpit (1988) and Reyes (1992) raised parallel issues for diverse learners who were not reaching their potential in workshop approaches to literacy instruction. The first course of action would be to reject the deficit theory stance of finding fault in the child. Reyes writes:

When teachers believe that student success is inherent in adherence to a particular philosophy, rather than dependent on their own teaching expertise, a distrust of self may occur. In this seeming distrust, teachers set aside common sense and behave as if making appropriate adjustments for different learners were a violation of the principles of whole language or writing process. Instead of adapting the program for the learner, the learner is expected to adjust to the program (1992, p. 438).

When Montessori teachers operate from a stance of distrust of self or of finding fault in the child, the result can range from taking choice away from a child to allowing a child to continue to fail. The respectful, responsive, child-centered approach is to critically evaluate the instruction, environment, and curriculum while considering what is known about the whole child to make needed adjustments. As Delpit writes, “The answer is to *accept* students but also to take responsibility to *teach* them.” (emphasis in original, 1988, p. 292).

As previously stated, culturally responsive pedagogy cannot occur without genuine regard for the child. Maria Montessori’s vision was to nurture the whole child, and she often mentioned love for the child as her inspiration in crafting her approach to education (Montessori,

1912/1964). Hilliard (1998) likened the Montessori method to *kindezi*, the Kongolese art of childrearing. He felt that both practices went beyond the professional realm to the human realm. Like Paulo Freire, Montessori was committed to improving the world through education, and educating through love (Darder, 1998; Freire, 1970; Montessori, 1912/1964). Her desire was for nothing less than to create world peace through education. She expresses this in one of her most well known quotes: “Establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war.”

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

Six Montessori teachers, including myself, find ourselves in public Montessori classrooms in the United States grappling with the complexity of serving a diverse group of students. This study was conceptualized as a way to facilitate our work together using a participatory research design. Park (1993) defines participatory research as a self-conscious way of empowering people to take effective actions toward improving conditions in their lives. These are organized efforts with an explicitly liberatory goal to make social changes. The teachers involved in the study took part in a dialogic focus group in which they reflected on and shared insights regarding their own teaching. As Freire said, “Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality.” (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 13).

Researcher Profile

This will be my tenth year teaching at the elementary school level. For three years I taught in private Montessori schools, then spent one year in a traditional education public school classroom before obtaining a position teaching in the public Montessori program. I’ve been teaching in my current position as the third and fourth grade Montessori teacher for six years. My education background includes a B.A. from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor with a concentration in psychology. After working at a runaway shelter for adolescents and teaching at an alternative school for children in a group home, I decided I wanted to learn more about being an alternative educator and earned a Montessori teacher’s certificate for ages six to nine at the Michigan Montessori Teacher Education Center. I taught in a private Montessori school in Ann Arbor for one year before moving to California where I worked in another private Montessori school. I went on to the next level in Montessori training for ages nine to twelve at the program at Montessori Teacher Education Center of the San Francisco Bay Area. From San Francisco State University I earned a Multiple Subjects Clear Credential from the state of California and a Reading Specialists Credential. My racial and cultural background is mixed, I am European American and Arab American, and I am a native English speaker.

School Setting

Hulsing Elementary (name of school and participants are pseudonyms) is located in a suburban setting south of San Francisco. The 440 students represent a range of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. 47% of the students receive free or reduced price lunch. The ethnic breakdown of the student population is: Hispanic or Latino 37% , White, not Hispanic 25% , Asian 11% , Multiple or No Response 10% , Pacific Islander 9%, Filipino 5%, African American, not Hispanic 2%. 26% of the students have been identified by their families as English language learners, although many more students come from diverse language backgrounds that do not have academic English as their first language. Of the English language learners identified, 73% speak Spanish, 6 % are Tongan speakers, Cantonese 4%, Vietnamese 3% , Hindi 3% , Hebrew 2%, Mandarin (Putonghua) 2%, Arabic 2% , Japanese 2% , Punjabi <1%, Hmong <1%, Portuguese <1%, Burmese <1%, and Filipino 1% (Pilipino or Tagalog).

There are twenty classrooms at Hulsing; six of these are Montessori classrooms. There are two special day classrooms, one lower elementary and one upper elementary. There is also a special day preschool and a regular education preschool. The special day classrooms and the Montessori program can be attended by children living anywhere within the District's boundaries; the remaining classrooms are generally filled by neighborhood children. Entry into the Montessori program requires that parents sign children up for the magnet program and then are chosen by lottery.

Participants Profiles

Karen

Karen has been teaching for twenty-four years, twenty-two of those years at the preschool level. She is currently a kindergarten and first grade teacher. Twenty of the years spent teaching preschool were in a private Montessori school in a suburban setting. Karen earned her B.A. with an emphasis in early childhood education from the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. She earned her M.Ed. and Montessori certification from Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California. Karen states that she feels the Montessori approach is the most effective way to educate children, citing the individualized instruction and enriched environment. She enjoys working in the public school environment because of the cultural diversity and she finds the work “Challenging for me in a good, invigorating way.” Karen is a European American who is a native English speaker.

Kim

Kim worked as a counselor for adolescents in a runaway program for three years before teaching social studies for grades fifth through eighth for five years. She spent four years teaching in an expulsion school for grades six through eight. Kim then worked as a counselor in a middle school for four years. This year is Kim's first in the Montessori program at the fourth and fifth grade level. Kim earned her BA from Pennsylvania University and her M.Ed. from the University of Pittsburgh. She went to San Francisco State University for a teacher's credential. Kim is European American and is a native English speaker.

Jade

Jade has been in education for ten years. She has been in her current position as a kindergarten and first grade teacher for the past six years. The years prior to her experience included positions as a Montessori aide in an affluent preschool, and then an internship in what is now her position and some time spent as a substitute teacher. Jade has a B.A. in German from the University of Montana, a Montessori certificate for ages three to six, and a California teacher's credential. Jade says she feels good about her current placement and "for the most part valued and appreciated by parents and staff." She does express feeling overwhelmed by the pressure to sacrifice her Montessori vision sometimes to fit everything else in, but she is happy to be making a difference in a public school. She describes herself as a "fervent Montessorian." Jade is European American and is bilingual and biliterate in German and English.

Zaria

Zaria has been teaching for twelve years. Prior to teaching in her current position as a first and second grade teacher, she taught in a private Waldorf school for seven years. Zaria attended San Francisco State University for her B.A. in liberal studies and her California teacher's credential. She took many classes in ethnic studies and was close to receiving a minor in this area. Zaria says, "Teaching at Hulsing is absolutely amazing. The teacher collaboration is of utmost importance to me!" She likes the diversity of the population in both the traditional and Montessori education program. She expresses concern about the Montessori approach: "I wonder about a Montessori Education working for all children. It does seem to work for children who can generalize and make connections between materials. Those who can not, seem to not succeed in a Montessori learning environment. This bothers me because I need to see success for all students." Zaria is an Arab American and is bilingual and biliterate in Arabic and English.

Sharon

Sharon has been teaching for eleven years, one year at the preschool level, two years as a substitute teacher at the elementary level, and eight years at Hulsing in the Montessori program. Sharon received her B.A. and teacher's credential from San Francisco State University and her Montessori certificate for ages six to nine at the Montessori Teacher Education Center of the San Francisco Bay Area. Sharon says she feels supported by her colleagues at Hulsing and has learned a great deal from both regular education and Montessori peers. Sharon became interested in the Montessori approach to education at the elementary level when her daughters attended the program at Hulsing. She says: "The Montessori approach, for me, is the best way to teach. I like the philosophy of 'child in the universe' looking at the whole and inspiring their learning." Sharon is European American and is a native English speaker.

Data Sources

The study involved a series of six hour-long weekly focus group meetings with six Montessori educators. Participants were given guided questions on which to reflect prior to the dialogue. Guided questions include:

1. What kind of cultural displays are evident from your students in the classroom?
2. How does the Montessori approach work for your students from diverse cultural backgrounds?
3. How are students' diverse cultural backgrounds addressed in your classroom?
4. How are diverse language backgrounds addressed in your classroom?

Participants also read two articles on the topic of culturally responsive education prior to meeting for week three and week four. The first article presented issues related to culturally responsive teaching (Delpit, 1988). The second posed these issues for Montessori educators specifically (Barron, 2002). Data collection consisted of audiotapes of the dialogues and responses to guided questions and researcher field notes. Data was analyzed for themes that emerged from the dialogues.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the results of dialogue with six Montessori teachers during six focus group meetings. The data included transcripts, notes from the meetings, and researcher's reflection notes. All names are pseudonyms. The purpose of the study was to explore how elementary Montessori teachers address culturally responsive education in their pluralistic, public school classrooms. Although themes that emerged from the dialogues addressed a variety of issues, participants were given the following questions on which to reflect before meeting for the focus group sessions:

1. What kind of cultural displays are evident from your students in the classroom?
2. How does the Montessori approach work for your students from diverse cultural backgrounds?
3. How are students' diverse cultural backgrounds addressed in your classroom?
4. How are diverse language backgrounds addressed in your classroom?

An analysis of the data revealed three generative themes that emerged from the dialogues: 1. *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Modifying Montessori to Make It Happen*, 2. *Challenges We Face*, and 3. *Educators at Crossroads: Locally, Nationally, and Globally*. Connections were made between themes in the topics that emerged. As generative themes evolved, so did ideas for actions to take to address problems and issues that were raised. These will be presented following a discussion of the generative themes in *What We Can Do: An Action Agenda*.

When I began this project, I naturally had some expectations, but also knew that the nature of the design was such that I could not predict how close or far from my expectations the actual outcomes would be. What did occur, and more tellingly what didn't occur, seems in retrospect not surprising. Nevertheless, this project has opened my eyes to the reality of how difficult this work is—the work of changing schools to provide equity for all learners.

I believe that my participants, each one of them, have best intentions to serve children as caring teachers. I believe also that my intentions as a researcher were to help each of them, and myself, examine our practices to extricate how Children of Color and children from diverse language backgrounds were being served in our Montessori classrooms. The dialogue needed to include direct address of race issues, but it largely didn't. Instead, we began the conversation,

addressed it as we distanced ourselves from it, talked around it, and resolved to return to it in the future.

How and why this happened needs to be looked at closely. First of all, as the researcher, I had primary responsibility to steer the group in a productive direction, yet I was often reluctant to do so. One factor was certainly my inexperience with this type of research and this role. Wanting to maintain the legitimacy of the power sharing dialogue as Freire (1970) would describe it meant that I had to refrain from taking over or positioning myself as the one who controlled the group. However, it was also my responsibility to share my expertise with the group and keep the work moving in a productive direction. I could have done a better job on both those tasks.

Another strong factor in my reluctance to lead the group to confront issues of race and equity was my relationships with the participants that were already established before the research began and that, as I knew all along, would continue after the project was finished. I work closely with all five participants and maintaining positive relationships was a concern. When the dialogues became emotionally charged, which should have been expected considering our topic and our positions within it, my concern was for preserving relationships between myself and participants and among participants as much as it was for the outcomes of the group's work. It was difficult to remain analytical and step in and point out the real issues underlying the emotive exchanges. An outside facilitator would have been able to address the group from a more objective place. This definitely had an impact on how far the group was able to move.

Also important is the impact of my Whiteness on this project. While I identify as a mixed-race woman and understand the ways in which my Arab background has shaped the person I am, I identify more strongly with being White. My appearance is White, so I have always had White privilege; that others have almost always treated me as White has affected my identity deeply. I am also from the middle class; therefore I am very much a part of the dominant culture group of the U.S. This means that I have always had the *choice* to be aware of race and culture or to not address race and culture. Confronting racism in myself and in my colleagues is a painful endeavor and throughout the focus group meetings I found myself avoiding it. My sense is that the other focus group members aided me in this avoidance for similar reasons.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Modifying Montessori to Make It Happen

Each theme included related subtopics; here topics included: The Role of Choice, Language and Literacy Instruction, Teacher Authority, and Student Behavior.

The Role of Choice

Students' choices and voice in their own education is a central precept in both the Montessori approach to education and culturally relevant pedagogy. However, as group members recognized, giving children choices for which they are not adequately prepared to make beneficial decisions can be detrimental to both their academic and social and emotional growth. The ways in which children's cultural backgrounds contribute to their being able to make choices that were valuable in a classroom setting was definitely a part of the dialogues. However, the ways in which teachers' cultural backgrounds contribute to our biases about what are valuable choices was not discussed. This omission caused us to miss an important opportunity to reflect on how our individual racially and culturally informed values determine our evaluations of who is making good choices in the classroom.

For example, the group was responding to reading the article by Lisa Delpit (1988) which presented the difficulty children who are not from White, middle class homes experience when their teachers assume they understand indirect displays of teacher authority. Zaria noted that she uses a very direct, authoritarian style that all children understand clearly. She noted, "Your behavior is not a choice," all students are expected to behave in appropriate ways in the classroom, regardless of racial and cultural backgrounds. This would have been an ideal place to have the group elaborate on what kinds of behaviors are "appropriate" and what are "inappropriate" for a classroom setting. Lewis (2003, p.171) describes how "acceptable forms of interaction" are culturally informed and gives the example of an African American boy who is sent from the classroom for standing up and dancing around to celebrate getting a correct answer. Nieto (2000) also relates how interpretations of behavior can be culturally biased and result in unfair disciplinary procedures. Would the Montessori teachers have found this boy's actions to be appropriate? How would it be addressed in their classrooms?

The group did address race in this discussion, but put a distance on the topic by framing it as an issue in education not necessarily in our classrooms:

Kim: What strikes me is that if the kids are not listening, the kids of color are not listening, so the middle or upper class White teacher is seeing this as an affront or

an offense against authority and the behavior issues continue, therefore we have so many kids of color in special ed, defiant related to this issue.

Michelle: That's why we, one of the reasons we over refer children of color to special education. Are we, do we even expect it from them?

Kim: See them as unmanageable.

So, here we are referring to "we" as educators as a whole, without sharing any personal experiences. At this point in the dialogue I (Michelle, the researcher) related how communication styles that differ among cultural groups can cause some teachers to interpret behavior as disruptive, along the lines of the boy Lewis (2003) describes who dances in the classroom:

Michelle: There's more of a, what's it, call and response, you chime in with your, it's an active, more of an active listening than when we say "active listening" and we mean quietly actively listening...

group laughs, "yeah" "right"

Michelle: Quietly, taking turns, but in, like a traditional African American Christian church, I know you're out there because you're chiming in, your saying...

Karen: (looking at Sharron, they are both White and Lutheran) Not the way the Lutherans do it...

Sharron: (laughing) No!

This would have been a timely place to be more direct with the participants, asking them to consider how they feel about differences in discourse style and if they'd considered how some children may have an unfair advantage in the classroom.

Maria Montessori espoused "freedom within limits" for her classrooms (Montessori, 1917/1965). In this way, respect for the child as an autonomous human being would be in place, but teachers as the adults caring for the children would still be given authority as guides. A healthy balance is reached between giving children choices and giving them appropriate boundaries to ensure their safety and well-being. Jade shared the challenges one kindergarten child who is White and from the dominant cultural background is having in her classroom with behavior because she had been given too many choices at too young an age. She related the following excerpt from her fourth parent conference of the school year:

If she were in a tighter box she could be a more loving, caring person because

she wouldn't be spending all this energy pushing, pushing. If you knew what your family policy was, then she could maybe be more other-directed.

All participants had concerns with the Montessori practice of allowing children to choose their work. Much discussion arose around how "pure" Montessori classrooms would have more choice in this area in place than we generally allow in our public school classrooms. Some reasons that choice is limited more in our program than in private schools that were discussed included: the pressure to teach to standards on which the children will be tested, students' lack of preparation for making choices that will foster academic growth, and a high number of students in classrooms who have needs that interfere with their abilities to make independent choices, such as social cognitive disorders and attention deficit disorders. How teachers deal with the behavior differences from students with these disorders will be discussed more fully under the theme *Challenges We Face*.

In terms of lack of preparation, the difference between our public program and many private school programs is often three to four critical years of preschool in a Montessori environment that were missing for our students. The Montessori preschool environment so carefully prepares children for success in later grades the effects have been documented in research to persist through fifth grade (Chattin-McNichols, 2001). Karen, one of the kindergarten and first grade teachers, shared that they are doing a lot of preschool activities in the early months of kindergarten, but of course it is difficult to make up three to four years in as many months.

In addition to a loss of preparation in preschool years, students are sometimes admitted into the program by mandate of the district to fill spaces that occur when children move out of the area or leave for various reason. Although effort is made to fill the spaces with children prepared to succeed in a Montessori environment, sometimes students enter the program with little or no Montessori background as late as third or fourth grade.

This lack of preparation to pursue choice activities effects the management of the classroom in different ways. For example, children in private schools in upper elementary grades would be free to choose projects and topics to explore academically, complete with planning mini field trips of small groups of students, as opposed to the "herd" field trip model we commonly use at our school. We talked about this difference:

Karen: Don't you think that the kids that can do that, going out excursions, have been so brought up, you know, through the ages, to do that that by the time they get to the fifth grade, they've been at such a Montessori school that has been, you know what I mean, conditioned to be able to do that. Here, not so much.

Michelle: Yes. The same thing where I was saying before...if they're not used to that, we have to do it differently. We have to modify the kind of choices they can make so that they can be successful.

Here, we missed the opportunity to examine our work as a team to build this into our program. There was no reason to assume that our students were not as capable as students in private schools from upper middle and upper class backgrounds to learn to pursue academic interests. Rather than modifying their choices, our teaching could be modified.

Zaria brought up that maybe some Children of Color who were not used to being able to make choices, who were used to more structure, might not be able to make beneficial choices. She illustrated with an anecdote of visiting her husband's family in Jordan where she was surprised that his thirteen year-old cousin didn't know how to cut up a steak because her mother did it for her. Her husband reminded her that this was not America, here children's lives were more directed by their parents. This is a point well taken, and one that shows a teacher reflecting on culture. However, how will this be addressed in the classroom? Does the teacher see her role as "coach" or "conductor" as described by Ladson-Billings (1994) which would entail maintaining a high level of expectations and then teaching toward student achievement? Or will the teacher simply restrict the choices that a child can make in the classroom? For Zaria, the sense of urgency to develop skills in underachieving children has led her to the latter.

Zaria noted that of nine children in her class that are below grade level, six were Children of Color. She stated:

Of the six that are Children of Color, not a single one of them can be independent, not a single one of them is focused enough for me to say, you know, go, go get a notebord, not a single one of them *will* be inspired. Latu inspired? Latu is inspired when he is successful. He is successful when he's working with me one on one. He *cannot* do it by himself. Rashid inspired? That would be hilarious. Rashid would turn the classroom upside down if I asked him to do an independent work...I am on his every last...Rashid, sit down. Rashid, sit down. Rashid, now

you're on problem number two. Jimmy inspired? I don't think so. Would a Child of Color be inspired? *Some* would. *Some would*. I mean, I don't want to overgeneralize. In response to Zaria, Karen said that when she has students who are not inspired to make good choices, she wonders if it is something in the environment, or in the way she presented the material that could be changed. She asks herself, what can I do to get these kids inspired? Zaria maintained that for kids who have learning difficulties, inspiration comes when they are successful and they are successful when they are given intensive teacher feedback, not independent work time.

All participants had put in place in their classrooms some structure to ensure that all children would be spending time working in academic areas across the curriculum rather than face an entirely open choice. Most common was using "free choice time" as a sort of reward that was earned when the minimum daily assignments from core areas such as reading, writing, and math were completed. Sharron asked the group:

Do you find that your children do strive for that independent time, to work? I do, with my kids, with my third graders especially. "Can't we have another IWP (Independent Work Period)? I have so much that I want to do, work on." Do you find that? In the last couple years I've been noticing that a lot. Maybe it's my fault because I don't give them enough independent time. It's chop chop! Chop chop! Next lesson! There's so much to cover. I feel bad about it. So I'm trying to incorporate more independent time.

Jade commended this effort, sharing an example of a child in her classroom who, upon earning independent time, announced his decision to do a research project on Asia.

Quality of work was an area all participants agreed that students were not to be given choice. High expectations for all learners were not optional and children would be corrected and asked to do work over again if it was not high enough quality. The issue of correction was raised, and the position that is promoted by researchers like Stephen Krashen that correction is ineffective and can cause students hurt feelings. Zaria asserts:

I just feel like we need to correct it. When we don't, we do them a disservice. "Oh, just let it go," I can't let it go! It becomes "shoping" thirty times, then it's "shoping" forever. It's different for adults. Of course as a White male, or a White female, or a whatever, an Arabic female you don't like it as an adult so

much because we're at a different place in our lives, but kids, I think they yearn for it. They want to learn the right way.

This position is affirmed by researchers such as Reyes (1992) and Delpit (1986, 1988) who would argue that children from diverse linguistic backgrounds need explicit instruction on correct form.

Language and Literacy Instruction

The group's dialogues turned to language and literacy instruction often during the six meetings. The classic Montessori curriculum was deemed incomplete for the task by group members, who acknowledged that while it had its strengths, it had been developed to teach literacy in Italian, a phonetically regular language. The issue of supplementing materials and methods was a frequently revisited topic in the dialogues. When discussing how to make our reading program more equitable, to serve all learners regardless of the background in literacy they come with, Jade and Zaria expressed that they felt that phonemic awareness was not adequately supported with the Montessori curriculum.

Karen: Doesn't it seem like the whole pendulum swung completely to phonics, you know, phonics, phonics, phonics, you don't get to read a book that makes any sense, just as long as it is phonetically correct. So then the whole pendulum swung way over to whole language which is put a book in front of them and relax while they figure out how to read it, and so now we need the pendulum to swing back in the middle and blend both.

Michelle: I think that the pendulum has to be directed to the kids' needs. Some of these kids, I'm not going to suffer them the phonics instruction to the nth degree when they've got it...

The conversation of reading instruction continued with Zaria and Jade advocating most strongly for an expanded phonics instruction program, especially for kids who are, as Zaria described, "missing the underpinnings of the English language." All participants agreed that comprehension instruction was important, and a balanced approach was important. Zaria strongly asserted that taking away phonics instruction too early was unjust for seeking equitable instruction for all learners.

As a reading specialist, I felt compelled to advocate for an approach to reading that included an emphasis on comprehension and did not lead children to over rely on phonics decoding. Research shows that children who kept from authentic literature experiences such as

reading and discussing books and instead are given a steady diet of direct instruction in phonics are set up to fail to become strong readers (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2005; Hiebert, 1998; Jordon, 2005; Land & Moustafa, 2005; Martens & Goodman, 2005).

The topic of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction was reprised at the group's last meeting within a discussion of making connections between students' background knowledge and new learning. At first, Zaria stated that she felt that there was no need to know what students' background knowledge was in learning to read, because learning to read was based on their learning to decode. I asserted that kids from the dominant cultural background were at an advantage with materials that meshed well with their background knowledge, because even in decoding you needed to know if you decoded correctly and it would help to know if what you just read was even a word.

Karen: Also, you know, with the very earliest little Montessori jobs in kindergarten for phonemic awareness, you're matching a sound picture, a letter, to a little picture. So for that kid, if you're matching, you know 'cake stand' they might be like, whatever, but a 'socket wrench' with an "s" they might know, so it does have some bearing. They can make connections that way, so their experience-background knowledge...

Zaria: Is important. O.K., I got it.

Sharon shared an experience she had in her classroom with Montessori language materials that involved using moveable parts of sentences printed on cards, but required knowledge of European-based nursery rhymes. She described how she felt surprised at first when some of the kids weren't familiar with the nursery rhymes, but it did make sense because of their different cultural backgrounds. Sharon decided to build that background knowledge for those students:

So I got a book of nursery rhymes from home, you know, an old one, and I did some of that prep, and then said now try that...I chose to bring in what I knew I had to supplement for them.

This conversation concluded with a discussion of the choices we face as teachers in multicultural classrooms of when we build the background knowledge of kids to match the dominant culture so that they are not always "left out" and when we make the curriculum connect to their preexisting background knowledge. Both approaches are important for educators seeking to implement culturally responsive pedagogy. Here, it is commendable that Sharon takes the time

to give students what they needed to access the curriculum. Giroux (2000) would likely acknowledge that these are attempts at equity and equalizing access that are made without awareness of their hegemonic overtones. The students own backgrounds could be affirmed if traditional tales from their own cultures were also brought into the classroom. Rather than seeing the students as needing to be supplemented, the curriculum should be the item of scrutiny.

Teacher Authority

Reading the Delpit (1988) article led to the group discussing the ways we display our authority in our Montessori classrooms. Montessori's philosophy was that teachers would find less need to express the authority and power "over" children in an environment in which children themselves felt empowered. However, Dr. Montessori developed this philosophy immersed in a culture that presupposed teacher authority in the classroom. Delpit maintains that teachers cannot assume that their students will buy into the idea of teacher authority being innate and that students do not necessarily benefit from a classroom in which the power dynamics between teacher and students are ambiguous.

In response to the article's consideration of the language used by teachers when giving directives, Karen stated:

I think this kind of question is so interesting because we do have those, sort of, like we're saying as middle class White women, the way we perceive our authority is so "divine right" or whatever, it's so ingrained, that kind of thing seems so ingrained that we don't even recognize whether we're doing it or not.

Karen felt that in terms of directives and language use, she was very direct with her kids because they are kindergartners and it's their first experience with school so they need that.

In fact, none of the participants felt that they used the "townspeople" talk described in the article to the degree that it was presented. All participants felt they were more directive and explicit in their language use with the children in their classes. This discussion overlapped with the topics described in *The Role of Choice*, especially when it came to giving directives to prompt for problem solving opposed to giving directions to solve the problem and move on to instruction.

The "go get a pencil" debate followed and became one of the most emotionally charged issues of the group's dialogues. A great deal of time was spent in two sessions trying to

understand the underlying meaning of the actions taken by different teachers when faced with a situation where a child was not getting started on an academic task.

Zaria's actions and views of the situation were in contrast to Jade's, Kim's, and my own. It was clear that she felt strongly about her position, but the underlying issues were not brought out clearly and the group floundered in trying to sort it all out and come to closure. Ideas of power displays and classroom control, respect for the child, racial and cultural differences in communication styles, social learning disabilities, and use of instructional time muddled together with no cogent resolution.

Jade felt that a central Montessori tenet was to teach problem solving. She said:

I guess I always come back to it's way more than Montessori materials, it's way more an attitude that we're trying to instill in them that they are in charge of themselves and they are capable and I don't know, I have a group of parent volunteers that I just want to tie up in a straightjacket because they are overbearingly helping!

Jade explained that she would prefer the volunteers not jump in with "You need a pencil and eraser!" before prompting a child to think about what he or she needs to get started. She saw this prompting as a temporary scaffold for a child to function academically without an adult's interference. This view is reflective of some of Dr. Montessori's most often referred to quotes: "The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say, 'The children are now working as if I did not exist'", "Never help a child with a task at which he feels he can succeed", and "No one can be free unless he is independent".

Zaria disagreed that this was an appropriate use of instructional time. Often over the course of the group's meetings she asserted her priority as a teacher was to get her students to be strong readers because failing that they had no chance at equity. She demonstrated: "Get. Your. Pencil." is the way to respond to a child who is not getting started. Jade countered that first you would want the child to have the experience with at least thinking about what was needed, "What do you need?" then give the directive, "Get what you need." Zaria responded, "Why should I waste ten minutes of reading time? Get your pencil."

Here, it seemed group members were growing uncomfortable with what appeared to be a lack of child-centeredness and respect for the child. However, it is likely that Zaria would support her response by aligning herself with educators such as those described in Ladson-Billings (1994) and Delpit (1988) who espouse a "no nonsense" approach to classroom

management and explicitly display their authority, their high expectations for student achievement, and their love for their students. At one point, Zaria said: “I’m going to be like the Black teacher...I’m going to make you independent in a whole different way. I’m going to make you a good reader.”

Karen: If you’re forever saying, “Go get your pencil” when will they ever...their whole entire lives will be “Go put your shoes on. Now go to your job.” They need to be able to figure it out. That’s why I like that “solve your problem”. You know we’re about to do writing, so what do you need? A pencil? Sweet, go do that.

Zaria: I just have a completely different style. That’s why I’m probably not going to last in Montessori more than next year. Yeah, they can solve their problems, and they will, when you are faced with solving...just go get a pencil. You’re wasting time.

Jade: But you’re not wasting time if you’re honing a skill.

Zaria: They’re not honing a skill. They’re just wasting time. “I want you to learn to read. Move!” And they do, they figure out how to get a pencil.

Jade: You don’t see it as part of the whole...

Zaria: No, no. It’s too much of a choice. They know they need a pencil! I don’t know. They need a consequence is what they need. You don’t have a pencil? You haven’t done your work? Busted!

When the conversation resumed the next week, Karen attempted to summarize where the group was on this issue. She felt that one thing all group members had in common was that none of us would say: “Would you like to go get a pencil?” But it wasn’t clear where we all stood on problem solving.

Zaria: If you’re asking kids who don’t know how to solve a problem, how to solve a problem, even with scaffolding, they’re not going to be able to solve the problem. So if the problem is the nonverbal learning disability and he can’t figure out how to go and get a pencil, he will sit there. He will sit there and sit there and sit there.

Karen: That’s why I’m saying, depending on the child. I’m saying, I don’t know how you guys are in your classroom, but I certainly don’t ever say, “Don’t you feel like you should, perhaps...”

Zaria: Except I’m not seeing it this way, I’m seeing it as even the question “What do you need now?” is too open-ended. What do I need now? I’ll tell you what I need now!

Michelle: But you're talking not about a cultural difference, you're talking about a disorder.

Zaria: I'm talking about a cultural difference too. A Black kid may say to me, "I don't know. I'll tell you what I need now. *You tell me* what I need now." Or they'll joke around. I don't know. I don't know for sure, I just know that some kids without disorders too will say you need to tell me what I need. I mean it's that authoritarian.

Jade responded that some kids, impacted by disorders or not, were in need of our assistance in terms of self-reliance. She said:

Your right, they're all different, but I do think, I do feel, anyway I still feel that it is our job to help them to become more self-reliant. So I think a non-impacted kid does need to...like, I remember Mary Prescott's CST (child study team meeting) where Kelly Roth was saying to me, "She can't actually walk from here to there without you telling her to do that." But I don't agree that it then becomes not my job to help her along that road to the extent possible. To the extent possible.

Sharron agreed with Jade, saying that she felt it was important to scaffold the child, help her along as much as possible, taking her from where she was and building on that. Zaria responded:

I think you guys are misunderstanding me. There are some kids, I mean, I'm not saying to everybody. I mean, I want independent... and you're saying we're saying the same thing, except for, they do what they...they will give you...they're response is their best effort. When someone responds that is their *best* that they're giving you, so they're not trying to be jerks, they're not trying...it's in the book in my room...so, you're first initial response is your best effort. You're not trying to irritate anyone, if you can do it, you will do it. If you can get a pencil on your own, you will do it.

Karen then shared that it had been interesting to her to read about the idea that understanding directives could be culturally informed. She stated that being a White woman, this was not something she had considered before, indicating some awareness that her position within the dominant culture had afforded her the privilege of choice in attention to the matter.

I wanted the group to consider how culture influenced children's motivations to follow directives, not just hear them. I shared how I had read that a teacher in Haiti was able to improve her pedagogy by observing the Haitian teachers and learning that the children were more responsive when told "You need to do your best because the teachers and adults here care about

you and you will make your family proud,” rather than, “You need to do your best so you can get good grades”. This would have been an ideal place to have the teachers reflect on how they consider culture and race in their own classrooms. By keeping it a conversation of what happens in other teachers’ classrooms in other countries, we distanced ourselves from the issue.

Karen spoke on a related subject, although she did not address race or culture. She added that even specific content learning needed purpose; kids need to know why they would be learning something. She shared how her kindergarten and first graders were unsure why they might need to learn about the calendar, but it was clearer to them when she related how she and another teacher had needed a calendar to plan ahead to go to a conference in New York. The children were familiar with this upcoming trip because they had been talking about when a substitute teacher would be coming and it helped them to understand the purpose and importance of learning about calendars. Rather than just presenting the classic Montessori calendar lessons, Karen framed them within a meaningful context for her students.

As it did with the topic of *The Role of Choice*, the topic of *Teacher Authority* intersected with the topic of *Student Behavior*, the next and final subtopic of the theme Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Modifying Montessori to Make It Happen. While *Teacher Authority* presented the ways in which the teachers displayed their power and control in their Montessori classrooms, *Student Behavior* will describe the myriad ways students react to this authority and to their relationships with school and learning.

Student Behavior

For the focus group members, student behavior was an important topic. Student behavior was felt to have a significant impact on how much children learned individually and as a group, how the teacher’s time and energy were directed in the classroom, and how classroom management was handled. Family and cultural influences were perceived by the group as being significantly influential in terms of shaping children’s independence and self-discipline, compliance with school rules, their expressions of gender identity, and their willingness to ask questions and self-advocate. What was missing from the dialogue, however, was an examination of teachers’ perspectives on these issues. Teachers’ preferences for some culturally informed behaviors have been found to give some students an unfair advantage (Lewis, 2003; Nieto, 2000). While group members were aware of children’s differences, it is unclear if they were also aware of their biases.

In terms of independence, participants understood that expectations of how much independence a child should have and should be able to handle is culturally informed and also varies from family to family. The Montessori approach, developed with European values, stresses children's independence and the teacher's role in instilling it. Conflicts between families' home values and this aspect of Montessori had caused some families to leave the program after kindergarten. As Jade put it: "It either is going to strike you one way or the other. You're either going to be grateful that the teacher is teaching your child to be independent, or you're hor-ri-fied."

To address this, the kindergarten and first grade teachers had recently redoubled their efforts in educating parents who were interested in the program for their incoming kindergartners. Two parent education nights were planned for parents of the community to ask questions and learn about the expectations of the program. While planning these nights, Jade related that she had said to the principal:

I hope you understand, I, we don't want only well-adjusted children with beautiful parents and magnificent home lives and everything, but we sure want the parents to know that yes, you are going to take off your own coat when you're five.

Certainly, Jade is expressing a preference for the capacity of a young child to be independent. However, much was left unsaid and unquestioned around this issue. For example, how do Montessori teachers define independence? What types of "independent" behaviors are perceived as necessary for success in the classroom? How do teachers support the development of these behaviors? Also, are teachers willing to modify their own practices to accommodate differences in family and child understandings of independence?

In Dr. Montessori's writings, she describes the contentedness of children who were free to make choices of the work they would do based on the work's ability to fulfill an inner need and the child's feelings of competence to do the work (Montessori, 1912/1964; 1917/1965; 1967; 2004). Practical life lessons and materials such as grooming one's hair, pouring a drink, or cleaning a table were included in the environment as part of this nurturing of independence. Dr. Montessori's own life experiences with breaking from gender role constraints and resisting the rise of fascism during World War II are also likely to have contributed to her penchant for independence (Hainstock, 1986; NAMTA, 1996). However, she also stressed that children are motivated to learn what they perceive as helpful to them in forming themselves as members of

their own cultures (Montessori, 1967). In a diverse classroom, the European culture does not represent all learners' culture and should not be given superior status.

In addition to buying in to the need for children to be independent, differences among families in buying in to the need to follow school rules and respect teacher authority was also an issue discussed by the group. Kim shared how, as a middle school counselor, she often encountered parents in child study team meetings who would look to the school to handle discipline issues. Sometimes in meetings parents would listen to the school representatives outline the problems and then look to their child to ask what they intended to do about this problem between themselves and the school. Kim said, "I would say, or someone would say, 'No, that is a parental decision, he has nothing to do with that, she has nothing to do with that, and look, here, let us give you some resources for that.'" Recently, she was talking with a friend about having problems with student behavior at the elementary level and was reminded that parents had a role to play as well and their help needed to be enlisted.

This position too is culturally informed. For Navajos, adolescence is seen as the onset of adulthood. Native American parents who allow their adolescent children to make their own decisions may be seen by educators from the dominant culture as being uninterested in their child's education (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994). Additionally, it is considered rude in Native American cultures to speak for another person (Delpit, 1995). A parent looking to their middle school child for a response is not necessarily an indication of their lack of willingness to be involved in educational decisions.

One area of student behavior that had been concerning me was the tendency of Latinas in my class to remain quiet, less involved in whole class activities, and less likely to solicit help from the teacher when confused. Lewis (2003) noticed this same pattern in her observations of schools. I wondered and raised the question to the group whether it was always to the students' benefit to be encouraged by family culture to be respectful and obey the teacher. In the case of self-advocacy, it may serve a student well to have a sense of entitlement to the teacher's time and attention, like children from the dominant culture who are given the message "the teacher is there to teach you". If a child is told to make sure she or he always listens to the teacher, will that child feel comfortable approaching the teacher with a question or for help? Or will the child find their lack of understanding a personal failure to listen carefully?

This led to a discussion about asking questions. If a child is not encouraged to ask questions this may impact her or his abilities to use that particular language structure and asking questions may become an area that needs development. Zaria related how in her upbringing, children asking adults questions was treated as an annoyance. In the researcher's experience with Latinas and Asian children in my class, self-advocacy skills can be taught when the teacher is aware and scaffolds the learners. When responded to with affection and praise, a significant increase of self-advocacy behaviors followed.

While other group members did not share having the same experience with self-advocacy issues, the intersection of gender and culture was seen as having a strong impact on their classroom community. Several members had noticed that some cultural groups seemed to be more lenient in disciplining their male children, even as they held their female children to rigid standards for behavior. This manifested in the classroom as more behavior from boys that needed redirection from teachers to maintain the learning environment and the need to encourage girls to assert themselves and feel comfortable participating. It was noted that the dominant culture of the United States does also play into this gender dynamic.

Teachers shared how they incorporated teaching children about natural consequences in life in their classrooms. Building a classroom community and sense of belonging and ownership for all children was part of Dr. Montessori's original design. Because children cared about the work they were doing, they were likely to address behaviors from other classmates that kept them from their work. Conversely, when children were functioning well in the classroom, classmates showed their appreciation. Because individualizing the curriculum is central to the Montessori model, each child is able to experience success and access celebration from classmates. Karen related: "I'm always so proud of our kids when they say 'good job' to each other and they really mean it, you know?" This type of expression in a kindergarten and first grade classroom is congruent with Lillard and Else-Quests (2006) findings that Montessori students report feeling high levels of community in their classrooms.

Within the dialogues on the theme Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Modifying Montessori to Make it Happen, teachers clearly showed that this one hundred year old approach to education did not demand unwavering adherence to its original form. Changes were made in regards to student choice, language and literacy instruction, and the management of expressions of teacher authority and student behavior. Some of the rationale for these modifications that

were made has been presented in the preceding section; others intersect with the issues that are presented in the next theme: Challenges We Face.

Challenges We Face

Participants in this study were six elementary educators who work together in a public school setting in California. With a decline in school funding and with a political climate that seems poised to blame teachers rather than support them, it is not unexpected that teachers look to one another for strength and morale to carry out what can often be a very challenging job. Collaboration with peers and a chance to problem solve collectively some difficult aspects of our work was highly valued by the teachers in this study. This following theme, “Challenges We Face”, emerged as a result of these dynamics.

Variety of Behavioral and Emotional Needs

The difficulty of focusing on curriculum when faced with a number of students with challenging behavioral and emotional needs was an issue raised in several focus group meetings. Each teacher had children in her classroom who they felt needed more resources than they were able to give while still adequately serving the other nineteen to twenty-six children of the class. In most cases, teachers could name more than one needy child. These were primarily children with social cognitive disorders such as autism and Asperger’s syndrome and attention deficit disorder. Some were diagnosed; some were undiagnosed but exhibited recognizable behaviors, and for some children it was unclear because there had been a lack of communication between medical professionals and the teachers.

When discussing two students in my classroom that had been in Sharon’s classroom the year before, differences in the children’s cultural backgrounds were seen as having an impact on the interventions that had been put in place to help the children. Both children were fourth grade boys who had been diagnosed with moderate autism and both were mainstreamed in a regular education classroom. This was the first year the boys had received any services from the school, and they were making good progress. However, the upper middle class European boy was making more progress than the lower middle class Filipino boy.

Socioeconomic class background came into play, because the family with more money had been able to afford supplemental medical and therapeutic interventions. Lewis (2003) found this to be one common way that children from wealthier backgrounds with learning difficulties had advantages over children from families with fewer resources. Also, when it came to

addressing the boys' disabilities at home and advocating for services in school, there was a cultural difference. The European boy's mother was an aggressive advocate for school services, and got results despite the school district's reluctance to fund them. The Filipino boy's mother had explained to teachers that the decision to accept the diagnosis was not hers alone to make. The extended family of aunts, uncles, and grandparents from both sides of the family had a say and many of the relatives felt that the boy just needed more discipline. Fortunately, with services already in place for one child, teachers and the principal were able to see that both got the services they needed.

For other teachers, getting services for children with special needs had often resulted in dead ends. Kim shared that she had been referred to programs she could put in place herself in the classroom, but with no solution as to when she might find the time. Zaria had come up against denial from family members. Both Jade and Zaria had been given suggestions that they maintain behavior modification point charts that would require their focused attention on one child every five minutes throughout the school day. This was not seen as a manageable intervention.

Karen acknowledged the difficulty of serving all children well, but pointed out that she felt the Montessori classroom helped her address the variety of needs by offering a structure in which the teacher could individualize.

Karen: At least the Montessori offers the potential for individualizing. We can modify for the kids that need that one on one, the teacher is free to do that. Other classrooms don't have that freedom and luxury.

Jade: If we're having trouble meeting all their needs, imagine how traditional ed teachers are managing it.

Group members discussed possible solutions to these problems. Three of these are presented in *Action Agenda*.

Variety of Language and Literacy Needs

With over twenty different home languages at Hulsing Elementary, and children who are at all different levels of English language development, appropriately addressing language and literacy needs was a priority for teachers in this study. The district had provided teachers with marginally helpful professional development that was really no more than a guest lecturer addressing an auditorium of over one hundred teachers with students from kindergarten through

middle school. There was no follow up and rarely time even for questions. Largely, the responsibility to serve English language learners fell on the classroom teachers in the district and resources varied from school to school.

I asked the group how they addressed English language development in their classrooms.

Michelle: I have never felt that a packaged, ELD program, where you pull a group-and they never all have the same issue, because we don't have English speaking and then we have a lot of Hmong speaking, or we have English speaking and then we have a lot of Spanish speaking. We have a lot of a little bit of everything and what they need is so different and they are at so many levels that pulling them into one group is a disservice.

Jade: I have now three kindergartners who are being pulled at the same time, to be with Ms. Roth at the same time, and I just had a child study team meeting for one of them and she is very different than the other two, but on paper, on the CELDT (California English Language Development Test) they look alike.

Jade explained that one of the children looks like she has less English on paper because she is much younger than the other two. One child is a very beginning English language learner, she and her family speak Spanish. But this child is manifesting very differently in the classroom: doing math, functioning as a student, picking up English.

At Hulsing Elementary, a resource specialist was available for small group instruction for children who scored at the beginning level of English language development on the CELDT. Jade felt that this arrangement was not ideal for her three students who were part of the pull out program. Karen, Jade, and I agreed that the most valuable instruction for the English language learners in our classrooms came from our knowing their individual needs and addressing them individually throughout the school day in speaking, reading, and writing activities. Once again, we acknowledged the structure of the Montessori day as a great help to being able to do this work.

Kim, the fourth and fifth grade teacher, is new to the Montessori program and has a classroom that looks more traditional in many ways. Kim is interested in learning more about the Montessori approach and actively pursues her professional development, including attending conferences and classes. In the meantime, her classroom is seen as a transitional classroom between the Montessori program and the traditional middle school program most of our students will attend. This traditional approach, and a class of twenty-six students, doesn't give Kim the

same time to work with children one on one during the school day, but she works individually with her struggling students before school and during her lunch break. The question of how to fit in thirty minutes of mandated English language development instruction at a variety of different levels has Kim ask the group: “Wasn’t there a time when there were EL teachers? Do you see; the responsibility again, for this, lays with us because there’s not enough money...back to gender?” She is referring to the way gender roles in our society effect the teaching profession as a whole, a topic we explore more in the next section.

One Teacher To Do It All

The group definitely expressed feeling overwhelmed often with the work load and responsibilities of teaching. Where the pressure was coming from, the reasons behind why teachers are in a position to be so pressured, and what to do about it were all discussed in the dialogues. Some of the sources of feeling overwhelmed have been explored in previous sections: the emotional and behavioral needs and the diversity of language issues that need to be addressed in instruction are two major areas. The teachers want very much to serve all learners and serve them well, but being only one person with a finite amount of time available was a reality that thwarted the vision. Meeting California State Standards for all curriculum areas and incorporating school and district-wide projects such as the workshop models for literacy instruction while protecting the integrity of the Montessori program was seen as a formidable task.

Patriarchy in the dominant society of the U.S. was seen as one of the social reasons that our jobs involved such high pressure. Group members felt that if the profession was male-dominated, more resources would be used to support teachers.

Michelle: We women are supposed to just take it on, and not complain, forge forward.

Kim: And can do, the can do.

Karen: Then it’s the chicken or the egg because women do do it.

Jade: We are doing it. We are doing it, I’ve noticed.

Karen: Do we do it because we can and that’s our nature or because that’s what society says to do and we’re like... o.k., great, I’ll try it, you know.

Kim: What’s funny, years and years ago when I was in high school there weren’t that many selections for women, as far as occupation, I mean it wasn’t spoken, but it was there, that you were a social worker, a teacher, a nurse or a seceratary. You weren’t

actually told that you cannot be a doctor, you cannot be a scientist. But it was very subtle, these were your choices.

This could have been a richer dialogue if race and culture had also been considered along with gender in the effects on the teaching profession. Currently, the demographic trend is that less People of Color are choosing teaching as a career (Howard, 2003). How might a more heterogeneous population of teachers, in terms of race and not gender only, have an impact on the realities of our jobs?

Kim pointed out that part of the problem with feeling there was an adequate amount of instructional time was all the extras that were “snipping away” at the day. Instrumental music, choral music, P.E., art, library, and computer class were all named as taking time away from the core instruction rather than supplementing it. I pointed out that the reason we addressed these in school is because the realities of many of our students’ lives, with both parents working multiple jobs, left little time for families to see that the children had access to them. Group members agreed with me that the purpose of education is to help people have better lives, and health and the arts certainly have their place.

Karen also felt that time management was a big struggle. She often stays after school until five or six o’clock at night to go through student work in order to keep giving lessons while the students are in school. Zaria felt that there was enough time in the school day, but that we needed to use the time efficiently. She described her day with kids:

It is from one lesson to another to another. It’s right now we did phonemic awareness and while their all doing Montessori stuff I’m pulling one group after another and then we all get together for a whole group lesson on “what’s the main idea of this paragraph.”

It’s, for the teacher it’s almost a burnout and that’s why I’m always frantic.

So, while Zaria expressed feeling like there was enough time in the day, at the same time she described feeling frantic and in danger of burning out.

In an earlier meeting, Zaria had explicitly said “we need help” and “we need to say no” when it came to doing all that she is describing in terms of delivering instruction as well acting as counselor and behavioral therapist to those children that needed those services. None of the participants felt that one person could serve all our students with high quality individualized instruction while also addressing behavior and emotional needs that were intense for some children. However, counseling services had a history of being cut and had been cut severely in

the past few years in the district. Getting the district to pay for a part time paraprofessional aide that needed to be shared among three fourth grade students in my classroom took four years from the time these children were in kindergarten. It is questionable if it would have happened at all if it hadn't been for the persistent advocating of the mother of one of the students who came from a high status cultural background. Why resources are being funneled away from public schools became another theme the group members talked about throughout the dialogues.

Educators at Crossroads: Locally, Nationally, and Globally

The Role of Teachers in Our Communities

Giroux (2000) addresses the cuts in funding that have been steadily increasing since the 1980s and the impact this has had on schools. Schools are less often seen as places in which society can place hopes of problem solving, but rather have become the problems themselves. In recent years this has led to an encroachment of privatization on public schools with such effects as schools accepting monies from corporations in return for advertising space within the institutions.

Focus group members discussed the lack of funding and the ways in which it impacted our daily work. Frustration was expressed over the billions of dollars that is wasted on textbooks that are adopted and then abandoned for another adoption creating waste of resources and environmental damage. I (the researcher) injected that many of the publishing companies that make "the list" of what can be purchased with State money have ties to the Bush administration and the oligarchy (Arce et. al, 2005). Meanwhile, school psychologists are cut, and kids go without the support they need to handle the stress of our modern lives.

Kim, a former middle school counselor, shared with the group that in her former position she learned how vital it was that students have counselors available to them. She related that many children come to school with incredible damage and pain that we may never know about. Kim had spoken to colleagues from the nearby middle school recently and they had expressed that the students coming up were increasingly challenging and teachers found it more and more difficult to do their work with the growing emotional needs. She posed the question to the group: "Could it be that we are now seeing the effects of all these cuts?"

Teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed by the politics behind the budget problems at schools. While on the one hand, they saw the value in being informed citizens and remaining

politically active; however, the realities of their lives were such that they poured themselves into their work as teachers leaving little energy for political activism in the end.

What group members did see as being within their capabilities was empowering all families and parents to become involved in the school community. Zaria, an active member of the PTA, shared how the Latino community had shown up in great numbers for a meeting at the beginning of the school year when a translator had been provided. This happened only once though, as the PTA in its current leadership did not seem to have the organization to continue the planning it took to pull the first meeting together. Zaria felt hopeful that new members of the PTA who were becoming involved and were ready to take positions of leadership for the next year would be capable of sustainable change.

This hopeful prognosis would be a welcome change for Hulsing as a community. Although not the majority, White parents and some Asian parents have historically run parent organizations. This is reflective of what Lewis (2003) found in the schools in which she observed. Some changes group participants were looking forward to, and were ready to assist the new PTA in realizing, included the integration of music and dance performances that represented the diverse cultures at Hulsing at school events that had previously been dominated by White music and White expressions of culture.

The Responsibilities to Prepare Citizens for Democracy

In response to the article by Barron (2002), Kim pointed out that it surprised her that so few teachers from the dominant American culture positioned preparing students to be active members in a democracy as a high priority. In the dialogue that followed, participants wondered if it was due to the current cultural climate. There seems a pervasive disinterest in politics, and the group questioned why that might be.

Sharon: Why do you think that happens? We entitle them [younger generation] too much? I didn't have it, so here, I want you to have it?

Kim: We're so lucky, we're so fortunate here I mean really, in the world.

Zaria: The respect for human life is so much here, compared to the rest of the world, on a global scale.

Michelle: To connect it to education, to critical thinking; you need to be able to read and analyze the information you're getting so you feel capable of having conversations, taking action, voting. Maybe that's what's missing from this generation coming up, too

much “back to the basics” movement, just memorize, don’t think. Why should I think? I’m just going to go out, get my job, my paycheck, what I’m entitled to, that’s the way the world works.

During an earlier dialogue, when discussing the importance of teaching critical thinking, Kim brought up the point that it can be difficult to get to this work for some teachers:

Kim: How do you get into critical thinking skills when you’ve got five kids in a class of thirty screaming things out, one kid jumping around, one person sitting on the floor, you have all of these different things happening, that’s kind of hard to teach the kinds of things that would be really helpful to be an effective teacher.

Michelle: I’m thinking if Maria Montessori were here she would have said trouble began long ago, maybe even in preschool, when we didn’t get them feeling good about themselves and good about learning and making choices, I mean, what is a democracy but making choices?

The work of Giroux (1994), McLaren (1994), and Freire (1970) would further suggest that schools can turn these classrooms of learners acting out their anger and hurt by making the learning relevant to them. Guiding students in examining critically the sources of their pain, leading back to the inequities that exist in society to perpetuate it, is a way to teach critical thinking skills and address the realities of students’ emotional trauma.

What We Can Do: An Action Agenda

Throughout the dialogue sessions, group members shared a number of strategies to address challenges and improve pedagogy. The results of this collaboration have been synthesized into the following items in the form of an action agenda.

1. Use the Structure of the Montessori School Day to Address Individual Needs

Participants felt that the Montessori work period, in which children are engaged in meaningful learning experiences, afforded them time to give individualized lessons to small groups and one on one. Remembering that this opportunity exists and planning instruction accordingly is an empowering tool for teachers seeking to serve all learners.

2. Evolve Literacy and Language Development Practices

Participants agreed that the Montessori language curriculum had not been designed with the diverse needs of the children of our classrooms in mind. As effective literacy practices emerge in the field, teachers will seek them out and implement them in their classrooms.

This work will include reflection, evaluation and collaboration with colleagues. The needs of the children will drive the work, with the goal being balanced and effective literacy instruction for all students.

3. Use Documentation to Advocate for Children's Needs

When student needs are requiring additional resources, teachers will act as advocates for those students. To ensure that action is taken and no child is left underserved, teachers will keep careful records of student work and behavior, instructional interventions, and attempts at procuring resources.

4. Saying "No" and Insisting on Support: Enlisting Help from Resource Specialists, Administrators, Physicians, and Parents

When attempts to obtain additional resources for students are met with suggestions that teachers attempt unreasonable intervention techniques, these suggestions will be refused and suitable support will be demanded. Interventions that have been shown to be ineffective, unmanageable, or to the detriment of student learning will not be accepted as part of the teacher's workload. Instead, an effective plan will be developed with input from resource specialists, administrators, physicians, and parents as appropriate.

5. Expand Cultural Knowledge Base

Participants acknowledge the breadth and depth of the work of educating oneself about the complexity of human existence and the multifarious ways race and culture interact. As cultural workers teachers understand their responsibility to gain this knowledge and will actively seek it out in the spirit of lifelong scholars. Teachers will invite families and community members to aid them in the process with sensitivity while retaining the primary responsibility for this growth for themselves. This work must necessarily include a study of one's own culture and a commitment to increasing awareness of the ways in which it has shaped one's understandings, world views, preferences and biases.

6. Publicly Value a Wide Range of Skills and Talents

Participants will create classroom communities in which diverse skills and talents are acknowledged, celebrated, and built upon. Conscious inclusion of the arts, physical achievements, spiritual successes in the intrapersonal and interpersonal realms, and other areas not traditionally lauded in our schools will be the goal.

7. Change the System/Change the World

Participants will commit themselves to the praxis of hope. Progress towards the vision of an equitable world will include challenging and exposing those agendas that would seek to oppress or exploit any groups or individuals. This will entail remaining vigilant of public affairs in the larger society and taking actions to resist oppressive agendas and move forward progressive agendas. In addition to this work being done in the larger public realm, on an intimate scale participants will seek to aid the positive growth of their close colleagues, neighbors, friends, families and selves.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The hope for a more equitable society relies on the dialogue of race and culture being taken up by educators in U.S. schools. Without it, we can assume that the systemic reproduction of a stratified society will continue to be reinforced and perpetuated through the paradigm that exists for education today (Lewis, 2003; McLaren, 1994; Giroux, 1994). The teachers involved in this study took an hour a week for a month and a half in the middle of a busy school week to address issues they all agreed were critical to their professional evolution. Yet, we distanced ourselves from the work and left it unfinished.

Researchers such as Lewis (2003) and Ladson-Billings (1994) describe the very common position that White teachers take on race: race is not an issue in their professional lives because they see all children as the same and treat them all equally. However, classroom practices and student outcomes reveal this to be untrue. Here we had a group of educators who were poised to step beyond this false stance, but hesitated. The dialogue had begun, but stalled. When faced with the most sensitive issues and emotionally charged positions, detours were taken in the interest of protecting relationships and self-esteem.

In my position as researcher, I hesitated to reign in these digressions. Inexperience, the desire to maintain harmony, and my own reluctance to push past a comfort zone played into this. Instead of probing the underdeveloped areas of our dialogue around the personal and immediate impact of race and culture in our classrooms, I focused on the issues the group had willingly brought to the table.

Zaria, the only other member who identified with being a Person of Color, is an Arab woman. Nieto (2000) has referred to Arab Americans as the “invisible minority”, a fitting description perhaps until the events of September 11th, 2001. Since the attack, Arabs have received plenty of attention, very little of it positive. One thing that has not changed is that misunderstandings of Arab culture are widespread and the heterogeneity of the people as a group goes largely ignored. Another thing that has not changed is the tendency of non-Arabs to identify Arabs they know personally as White. In our focus group, members revealed this inclination by referring to all group members as “White women” and using the collective pronouns “we” and “us” in reference to Whiteness.

Regardless of how others view her, Zaria is clear in her identification of being a Person of Color. Because she is a person who is deeply committed to equity in education, Zaria was not willing to let other group members stay in their comfort zones, and she expressed this by being provocative. This was a result of the strength of her emotions and her powerful need to make an impact with her words. With Zaria the issue of race was not avoided, she directly addressed it, but in a way that did not always convey respect or child-centeredness. Some of her comments were disturbing. Her comments were revealing of a person who has allowed fear to have more a factor in her pedagogy than is constructive. Many times, Zaria explicitly said, “I’m afraid. I’m afraid for our kids.” This fear has manifested in expressions of power and control in the classroom that seem to indicate an erosion both of students’ freedom to make choices and of Zaria’s belief that all children are capable of being invested in their own education.

Jade has expressed most overtly the strength of her beliefs that a certain value set is correct and others are wrong. She does not seem to see this as a racially or culturally informed stance. To do so would be an admittance of ideals aligned with cultural supremacy, an idea she would find ugly to be associated with and out of sync with her self concept. However, it cannot be denied that Jade’s repulsion toward “coddling” and her deep admiration for instilling independence in young children is a culturally informed value. No doubt, Jade feels that these values have merit because they will help a child succeed in the dominant culture. Nevertheless, the fact that the dominant culture rewards these values does not make them superior to the values of interdependency and protection of childhood that are stronger in other cultural groups.

Karen expressed openness to learning more and a willingness to look at her own practice in the classroom. She seemed to want to address race and culture, but not to the price of disrupting the cohesiveness of the group. She very gently challenged Zaria on some of her comments that did not reflect a child-centered orientation; however, Karen is still a new teacher at Hulsing and has expressed many times how much she enjoys being part of the team. She may have been weighing relationships as the researcher was when deciding how much confrontation she would attempt. Karen works closely with Jade as they are both kindergarten and first grade teachers and this may be part of why she didn’t challenge any expression of cultural superiority. It is also possible that expressions of hegemony went unnoticed, as Karen is positioned within the dominant group herself and therefore has that choice.

Kim did not often directly address race in her comments. She seemed comfortable addressing gender and politics and was somewhat engaged in the discussions around culture. Kim did need to miss part of two meetings, so this had an impact on the extent to which her voice was part of these dialogues. She is also new to the Montessori program and our school and she is coming into a very cohesive group, these group dynamics may have played somewhat into her reluctance to share on sensitive subjects. Once again, Kim is part of the dominant cultural group and therefore arguably has more choice in whether or not to engage in an examination of equity.

Sharon also did not engage much in the conversation when it came to topics of culture or race. She did express interest in learning more about culturally responsive teaching, and shared strategies she is using that she felt demonstrated cultural responsiveness, but didn't indicate that she was rethinking or examining her practice as a whole in regards to race or culture. Part of this is related to her communication style in general. Sharon tends to be less assertive in contributing in group situations in general. When directly asked for her thoughts, Sharon did have contributions to make and did ask the group for specific suggestions on how to address diverse learning styles. Perhaps if the researcher had been more experienced as a group facilitator, Sharon's voice would have been heard more.

Overall, this work likely could have gone farther if the group had an outside facilitator. My closeness with them hindered our progress. Even as I write this, I am aware of my great concern with damaging relationships. I do not want to call a friend or myself a racist or a person struggling with internalized racism. But how can we live in this time and place, in a society that is saturated with systemic and institutionalized racism and be immune to ill effects? This should have been addressed as something to expect, to challenge, and to forgive as we began our work.

The group did address some areas that warrant more discussion. In *The Role of Choice*, the differences between private Montessori schools and public Montessori schools were discussed without addressing the ways in which class is constructed in schools. Hollins (1996) and McLaren (1994) describe the cycle of middle- and upper class citizens having access to better funded schools, which in turn prepare them for futures with more economic advantage while the converse is true for poor and working class citizens. Schools determined to be "underperforming" are more likely to be susceptible to packaged programs that restrict teacher choices as they restrict student choices (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2005). Taking choice out of

the equation does not facilitate critical thinking skills and does not prepare students for positions of leadership in the greater society. They are prepared only for following directions, for jobs not professions, and certainly not for academic achievement in universities.

When discussing literacy practices, a similar issue was raised. The group grappled with the question of how to give all learners what they needed to succeed. While direct instruction and a focus on skills is a necessary component for diverse language learners who must be given equitable access to the form of academic English, respect for the learners' potential, for their needs as humans, necessitates a balanced approach in which choice is incorporated. All learners need to feel that their perspectives are valued and valid. Therefore, all learners should have opportunities to engage in process writing approaches in which they are encouraged to express their voices. All learners should have the opportunity to seek out literature that engages, informs, and transforms their views of self. While Delpit (1998) and Reyes (1992) challenge educators to think critically about the equity of workshop approaches, they never suggest that these approaches be abandoned for diverse learners. Rather, they ask that they be tailored to the needs of the children. Some may need explicit instruction on making good choices, others will need direct connections made between mini-lessons and their own work, some will need respectful correction and guidance in pronunciation and the mechanics of language.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include some absences of participants from part or all of a focus group meeting. For the first dialogue, Karen was absent. For the second dialogue, Sharon was absent. Kim had to leave early for the fourth and sixth dialogues; she missed the last fifteen minutes of the fourth dialogue and the last half hour of the sixth. Unavoidable time conflicts with other professional meetings and professional development were the cause of the absences; a high demand on our time is a matter of course for teachers and these absences in no way reflect a lack of interest in participating. However, the result is less input from the three participants named and in participatory action research design this should be considered a limitation.

Other limitations may include the social closeness of group members and between members and the researcher before beginning this work and the researcher's inexperience in the role of facilitator. These dynamics may have inhibited group members in the dialogue about race and culture, as has been discussed previously.

Finally, a lack of racial diversity among the participants themselves, including the researcher, may have impacted the results of this work. The group consisted of four European American women, one Arab American woman, and one European Arab American woman. The group could have benefited from the inclusion of members of communities that have historically and are presently more marginalized in educational settings. This is not to say that a homogeneous group cannot and should not attempt this work. Indeed, members of the dominant group need to seek to be involved in projects such as these without putting the responsibility on oppressed groups to lead them or inform them. However, a more homogenous group must approach the process mindfully and make extra efforts to push beyond comfort zones.

Recommendations and Implications for Further Research

At the conclusion of our sixth dialogue meeting, Sharon expressed the feeling that this work did not have to stop at the conclusion of our last formal meeting. Her sentiments were affirmed by other group members. The researcher sees this work as a process, both for myself and my colleagues, one in which we have just begun. Each of the participants spoke of the value of collaboration to improve practices, and each teacher is sincerely committed to the success of all the children in her classroom. This work of dismantling the status quo, both externally and internally, is a complex and demanding task but essential and worthy of our efforts.

The willingness of the teachers in this study to engage in this process and their desire to continue it reveal an understanding of how important it is. As Montessori teachers in public school settings they already have shown their commitment to education by seeking the additional training it takes to become a Montessori teacher while receiving no extra monetary compensation from the district. Each of these dynamic women continues to attend conferences, share professional literature, and extend themselves in many ways in the pursuit of professional growth. This researcher is looking forward to the development of this work we have begun together and to seeing the benefits of our work go to the children, families, and community of our school.

Engaging in continuation of dialogue about race and class in schools is a recommendation not only for the six members of our group, but for our school community as a whole, for our district, and for all schools in our nation. School administrators should show that they value this work by funding it. Teachers deserve to be compensated for their time, even when they do find the work rewarding regardless of being paid. Sustained professional

development that addresses issues of race relations and access and equity in schools is essential. This must include opportunities for European American teachers to be trained to go deeper as reflective practitioners to understand their responsibilities as cultural workers.

Future research could evaluate the efficacy of different approaches to the work of participatory research that address race issues in schools. Comparisons of outcomes for different groups could include groups of heterogeneous and homogeneous participants, participants who know one another prior to beginning the work and groups made up of strangers, and those led by experienced and inexperienced facilitators, for example.

Conclusion

The inequity in our society, perpetuated in our schools, needs to be addressed and reversed. As group members agreed, we can't go on like this. When groups of people are marginalized on the basis of racial and cultural affiliation, anger and pain are the result. Historical patterns and the nature of human beings tell us that when anger and pain escalate and reach critical levels, violence and destruction is the result. The work of reversing the trends that have led us to where we are is not simple, but is essential.

To look critically at ourselves, our beliefs, what we've learned, what we take for truth...this is the work we need to do to change the status quo, to change the world. If we are not willing to make ourselves vulnerable and to step out of our comfort zones, this will never happen. We need to be prepared to deal with anger, fear, guilt, and shame and take the energy from all of those to make progress, not impede it.

As long as there is inequity, dialogue offers hope. It is a humanizing endeavor, perhaps even more so when positioned within schools. It invites respect, it requires listening and giving, it affirms life. From a quote by Lakota Sioux Chief Tatonka Iotanka (Sitting Bull): "Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children."

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