



Montessori & Social Justice: Overlap, Potential, and Areas for Growth

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Background

Montessori Education is aligned with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), yet poor students and students of color are not attending Montessori schools. In this research, *Narrative Inquiry* is used to unpack how well Montessori education is serving poor students and students of color. Results show great potential, while also display a complex web of history, perception, and current practices that need to be addressed in order for Montessori education to best serve poor students and students of color.

Literature Review

- **Education Debt.** This research uses the phrase “education debt” instead of “achievement gap” to acknowledge the difference in standardized test scores between White students, African American students, Latina/o students, and students who have recently immigrated to the United States. The phrase “education debt” was coined by Gloria Ladson Billings, PhD to emphasize the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debt carried over and owed to communities of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006).
- **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Montessori Education.** Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) describes teaching practices that are effective in culturally diverse classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Several researchers have studied the congruence of Montessori Education and CRP (Massey, 2006; Moquino, 2002; Schonleber 2011; Yezbick, 2007).
- **The Promise of Montessori Education and Student Achievement.** More research is needed, and the jury is out on whether or not Montessori Education positively affects student achievement, but it is promising, especially in the subject of reading. (Ansari & Winsler, 2014; Brown, 2016; Cisneros, 1994; Lopata, Wallace, & Finn, 2005).
- **Why Montessori Isn’t Moving the Needle on Education Debt.** There is a lack of Montessori public schools and existing Montessori public schools are often inaccessible to poor students and students of color (Debs, 2016).

Research Question

How do Montessori educators who work in social justice understand the overlap and potential of the two frameworks?

Method

The qualitative research method, *Narrative Inquiry*, was used to collect and analyze narratives about the congruence of Montessori Education and Social Justice as told by Montessori educators across the country. Recruitment happened through association with Montessori for Social Justice (MSJ), an organization that hosts an annual conference and Facebook page. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded over the phone as the educators were situated across the country working in a variety of Montessori contexts. Open Coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used to code and analyze the transcriptions from which several themes emerged.

Findings

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- Montessori classrooms can be successful culturally relevant classrooms.
- Montessori classrooms can be successful in teaching reading to all populations.
- Montessori classrooms develop students with good self-regulation and executive functioning skills that support future success in school.
- Montessori classrooms have a successful framework for building healthy and helpful classrooms, families, and school-wide communities.
- Montessori Education is increasing in the public sector and therefore, theoretically, becoming more accessible to all socioeconomic groups.
- There is a growing population of Montessori educators who are committed to working with non-affluent populations.

Montessori & Social Justice: Areas for Growth

- Montessorians could work to create more welcoming environments. Bias may be inherent in some Montessori cultures.
- Montessori could benefit from emphasizing the inclusive components of the philosophy. The pedagogy is often misinterpreted.
- The debate about fidelity and which teaching practices and materials are “more Montessori” may keep Montessorians stuck in practices that support only the dominant culture.
- Additional teacher training and resources are needed. Montessori teacher certification programs should develop and include focused trainings on such topics as: parent engagement, navigating testing in public schools, trauma training, mental health support, and anti-bias training.

Implications for Montessori Education

1. Montessori needs to be considered as a strategy for inclusivity in the global educational landscape.
2. Montessorians need to continue to reflect upon their current practices in order to better serve poor and minority students and actively promote inclusivity.

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