How Montessori Early Childhood Teachers Approach the Race Classroom
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Montessori early childhood teachers are approaching the topic of race and racial bias in their classrooms. More specifically, the intent was to identify how Montessori teachers react to and address race-related incidents and what Montessori teachers present or teach children regarding race and/or racial bias. Alternatively, if Montessori teachers were not approaching race or racial bias directly, this study examined whether an alternative or indirect means of approaching race and racial bias was used in the classroom. In addition, this study explored whether Montessori teachers received instruction in their training regarding how to approach race and racial bias in the classroom. This study sought to add to the literature on young children and race, and inspire whether culturally relevant and sustaining talk and activities that include race talk are realized and/or implemented in the early Montessori childhood environment.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were early childhood teachers who responded to the American Montessori Society’s call to the American Montessori Society Montessori teacher research panel. The respondents to this study indicated on the informed consent letter if they would be willing to participate in the research by answering questions that emerged from survey data through online interviews.

Research Method and Design

Surveys were coded using MAXQDA. The interviews were conducted online through the Collaborative Ultra platform. Field notes and memos regarding the interviews were utilized to capture any impressions or themes. A confidential transcription service transcribed the interview audio recordings. The research group liked responses through open and then axial coding using MAXQDA, proceeding to overall themes. The survey results were initially coded with an open coding process, proceeding from broad similarities to more specificity. The survey narratives were comparable to focus group data. As such, the analysis followed a loose grounded theory approach. Research notes and journals were again utilized to make connections between and within the categories. An independent analyst reviewed the coding scheme and independently coded the data. After slightly revising the training code definitions, intercoder reliability was ascertained at approximately 93%.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite research dating from 1947 through the present day that demonstrates very young children possess and enact racial bias (Aboud, 1988; Braithwaite & Williams 2013; Clark & Clark, 1947, Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2008, Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), most teachers and parents do not address the topic of race with young children in more than a superficial way (Aboud, 1988; Katz, 2003, Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Some parents and teachers do not discuss race at all or employ a colorblind approach, ignoring the personal and cultural capital that is important to the developing identity (Derman-Sparks & Ramgolam, 2011; Vittrup, 2015b). While children’s conversations could be conducive to conversations about race, evidence suggests these conversations between adults and young children do not often occur, especially in preschools. What parents and teachers could be overlooking is that race is inherently racial and ethnic differences are happening between children. Braithwaite and Williams (2013) noted: [for young children] racial conversations occur every day in the preschool classroom. Often teachers ignore the conversation or take a surface almost passive way around the dialogue, losing the opportunity to open and create the discourse of race in a comfortable, safe, learning space (p. 82).

Parents may often adhere to the same orientation as these teachers, ignoring the topic until some future date when they feel their child is mature enough to discuss race and racism (Dunham et al., 2008, Katz, 2003, Pashalis, Bigler, & Suzio, 2012, 2005, Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Vittrup, 2016b).

RESULTS

Themes from Surveys

Theme 1: Children are not biased.
Theme 2: Indirect or implicit teaching around race inherent in Montessori.
Theme 3: Comfortable talking to children about race.
Theme 4: Education about race and racial bias is implicit in Montessori training, but not explicit.

Overall Theme from Surveys

The central theme from respondents was that Montessori teachings and training implicitly prepared them to discuss race and racial bias if the topics arose in their environments. Most equated teaching or talking about race or racial bias with teaching about diversity, respect, peace, race, education, culture, or social justice. Montessori teachers did not consider that diversity, respect, and peace equated to race and racial bias. Montessori teachers did not see the need to teach children about race and racial bias, what are some ways that race and racial bias are addressed in the classroom? What instruction and guidance from their teacher education program did Montessori ECE teachers receive in discussing and addressing race and racial bias?

1. How do Montessori ECE teachers talk about race and racial bias with children?
2. How do Montessori ECE teachers teach about race and racial bias?

IMPLICATIONS

• As teachers grow in their racial identity and understanding, a commitment to equity must be paired with action. Social justice and racial inequities require concentrated efforts if systems of oppression are to change.
• Montessori teachers must participate in training on cultural and racial identity work just as they do with the transformative Montessori teacher identity work.

DISCUSSION

Montessori teachers’ actions largely coincide with the actions of other mainstream early childhood educators in that they generally do not explicitly talk or teach about race or bias in the early childhood classroom (Vittrup, 2016b). According to the results of this study, while participants do explore race indirectly through cultural and social teachings, they mainly offer a superficial approach to race and bias, delivered through lessons with messages of kindness and peacefulness. Lazur and Offenberg (2011) portrayed these classrooms as “silent” classrooms and maintained that “within these silent classrooms, the realities and consequences of racism are left unproblematised, contributing to its normalization within society” (p. 276). Inherent in the participant’s approach to race and bias was the belief that young children are not biased, while the research demonstrated that children exhibit race preferences in infancy and develop race-biased attitudes by age three (Aboud, 1988, Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010; Katz, 2003; Kelly, Quinn, Slater, Kang, Gibson, Smith, et al., 2005, Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996).

FUTURE WORK

Further research is needed on best practices to enact race talk and teach about race and racial bias in the early childhood classroom. Research that tests the efficacy of disparate ways of introducing race and race talk with young children and teacher engagement in that process would be of interest. In addition, interrogating the connections between feminine discourse and difficulty with race talk in early childhood settings could be informative to teachers and training centers. Further, study of the whiteness and microaggressions of Montessori educators, education teacher programs, and schools could elucidate relevant information. Persistence beliefs of Montessori efficacy across cultures has curated serious examination of the microines and politeness inherent in the model that may be obscuring a centered whiteness, particularly in the United States. The socio-cultural and psychological components of in-group bias, evaluative conditioning, and motivated reasoning among Montessori practitioners may also yield interesting results.

Without challenging the existing whiteness endemic in early childhood education, little hope exists that inequities in later education will be ameliorated. In order to prepare children for the times in which they live, teachers must first prepare themselves.

REFERENCES

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