MONTESSORI EDUCATION & SOCIAL JUSTICE:

OVERLAP, POTENTIAL & AREAS FOR GROWTH

By

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challenge me when he worries I am off course, and who is an inspiration to me in how one

accomplishes their dreams. Thank you.

Abstract

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.

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Introduction

Context

When Montessori began as an educational approach over 100 years ago, it was designed to serve children with special needs and children in poverty. Montessori's roots were planted in working with children from very under-resourced classes in impoverished areas of Rome (Standing, 1988) in the year 1907. The popular narrative is that when Dr. Montessori's method demonstrated strong educational success with these populations, it quickly was co-opted by the general population wanting its benefits for their children, and over the next 100 years Montessori increasingly became adopted and utilized by middle-class and affluent families as the philosophy spread world wide. Today it is known as the chosen school for Prince George in Norfolk, England (Pearson, 2016), as well as the schools from which come successful businessmen - like the founders of Google (Sims, 2011). The Wall Street Journal (Sims, 2011) said "Ironically, the Montessori educational approach might be the surest route to joining the creative elite, which are so overrepresented by the school's alumni that one might suspect a Montessori Mafia"(Sims, 2011).

What happened to Montessori? Why and how did this pedagogy, originally created for

the underserved, become a pedagogy thought to serve only the elite? In the Montessori world today, there are many of us who are very interested in unpacking this question in addition to outlining how going forward Montessori can serve more children - including children of color and children in poverty.

Based on this research I argue that Montessori education is a pedagogy that could be vital in serving children of color and children in poverty to begin eroding the "education debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Specifically, Montessori educators herald the philosophy's empowerment of self-regulation skills, academic score improvement, community building, and culturally relevant practices as ways in which Montessori education supports children of color and children in poverty. However on the flip side of that coin, Montessori educators perceive the hundred year old education method as needing to address bias in its structures and practices; expand and improve its image; shift the focus away from the fidelity debate; and add resources to the Montessori teacher certification programs including, anti-bias education, trauma training, and navigating public school testing systems.

In my literature review I will explore Gloria Ladson Billing's concept of the "education debt" as the defining concept I hope to impact, I will link Montessori education to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) by showing that it is not the student's culture that needs to change to fit the schools, but rather the school culture that needs to change to fit the students.' In the literature review I will also explore the research on Montessori education and student achievement to show how Montessori education does positively impact scores of students of color, but that accessibility to these schools is a barrier.

Then, using a narrative inquiry approach, this paper will showcase narratives of educators

who actively work to further social justice goals. These narratives confirm the suggestions I

identified in the literature review, and show Montessori educators working with agency to better

serve poor students and students of color in their schools and classrooms - displaying that

Montessori is more complex than its general reputation may communicate.

Two main themes emerge from these narratives: a) Montessori educators believe there

are strengths in using the Montessori system of education to serve under-resourced populations.

These strengths include a positive impact on reading, self-regulation/executive function,

community building, and the philosophies use of culturally relevant practices. The second theme

is b) Montessori educators have identified areas for growth that must occur including, using care

in creating welcoming environments for students of color and poor students, and adding

supplemental trainings and resources to Montessori certification programs.

For the purposes of this paper when discussing the "achievement gap," the focused

community will primarily be children of color, in particular African American students. This

selection of focus is due to the most concerning "gap" in discussions around achievement, is the

gap between white students and African American students (NAEP, 2015). At moments in this

research class and socio-economic status are also taken into consideration because populations of

color are at times are part of multiple identity groups, making the secondary categories

significant in this discussion. That said, this research recognizes the significance of working on

disparities with all groups impacted by the inequities of our educational system, but for the

purposes of this paper, and due to the brevity of the research, the aforementioned gap will be the

one primarily focused on.

When using the general phrase of "social justice" in this paper, the work that is being

referenced is work that is perceived by the participants as trying to close the "achievement gap".

I look to the definition of social justice posted by an organization titled, Montessori for Social

Justice (MSJ). MSJ defines themselves as,

> a community of educators and parents committed to public and nonprofit Montessori
>
> education as a vehicle for helping each child reach their full potential, providing
>
> educational equity, meaningful racial, economic, religious and special needs integration
>
> of students and families, building vibrant neighborhoods, towns and cities (Montessori
>
> for Social Justice, n.d.).

On their website, MSJ posts the following definition of social justice, and is the preferred

definition for the use of this paper "… promoting a just society by challenging injustice and

valuing diversity," it exists when "all people share a common humanity and therefore have a

right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights, and a fair allocation of community

resources." (as cited in Toowoomba Catholic Education, 2006).

Goals

The task at hand is twofold and complex. First it is important to explore if Montessori

does and/or can in fact serve poor and minority populations well. Second it is important to

understand why and how, despite good intentions, Dr. Montessori's system of education often

misses this mark, and how it might consider improving. Through a literature review and a

collection of Montessori educators' narratives - we are allowed a detailed picture of how

Montessori is meeting these social justice goals of serving more than affluent populations, as

well as begin to sketch out a road-map for the Montessori community on how to take action in

order to be of better service.

The goals are therefore multi-pronged. First is the hope to showcase the potential of the Montessori method in serving poor and minority students. To do this I create a strong link between Montessori Education and CRP teaching practices, as well as showcase narrative examples of successful social justice work happening in the Montessori educators' narratives. This illumination has the goal to impact Montessori teacher training programs by encouraging more translation of the 100 year old pedagogy into what current educators and researcher herald as "good teaching". If city planners, educators, politicians, and parents understand the potential of Montessori to work to close educational disparities in our school, the demand for these beneficial practices, settings, and schools will hopefully increase in number and accessibility.

A second goal of this research is to challenge the Montessori community to unpack and dismantle the myriad of ways that Montessori classrooms may be inaccessible and unwelcoming, in both concrete and symbolic ways, to communities of poor and/or minority families. Through a review of the literature and an analysis of the data, I call into action every individual in the Montessori community to work to eradicate exclusion and bias from our schools, classrooms, and practices to ensure our work is always aligned with Maria Montessori's original intent, and support these culturally relevant practices to getting to the students who need it most.

Literature Review

This literature review will first address a defining concept that guides this discussion. What are we attempting to impact when we discuss working to end racial disparities in

education? To answer that, I will explore the important distinction made by Ladson-Billings

(2006), between the terms "achievement gap" and "education debt". I will then explore the link

between CRP and Montessori by first defining each school of thought, and then reviewing the

literature of overlap. Finally, I summarize recent research that speaks directly to Montessori's

impact on the educational debt, and try to understand how Montessori can and does serve poor

and minority students. This will be done by exploring recent studies around Montessori

education and achievement.

Through selection and discussion of this particular set of literature, I will set the scene, a

backdrop if you will, so that I may then draw back the curtain to view a cast of characters, and

spotlight their narratives of personal stories on Montessori and social justice goals for serving

poor students and students of color. The aim is that these stories are enhanced by the larger

context and setting of this literature review.

The Education Debt

To understand what I hope to address with this research, we must turn to the phrase

"achievement gap", and in so doing I steer this audience toward more comprehensive

terminology. Gloria Ladson Billings, during her 2006 presidential address, coined the

term "education debt"(Ladson-Billings, 2006). The "achievement gap" is an overused phrase to

acknowledge the difference in standardized test scores between White students and African

American students, Latina/o students, and recent immigrant students. Ladson-Billings uses care

and economics to unpack this term, and suggests it is not comprehensive enough when

describing the inequities in our educational system today. An "achievement gap", in short, summarizes a snapshot of what she likens to a one-year budget using an economic analogy. It does not account for, or hint at, the extensive debt that is carried over year after year, century after century, against non-white communities in this country. How can we close a deficit (or a balanced budget in economic terms), while simultaneously live with an enormous debt as an umbrella over the whole system?

The presidential address clarifies that the words "deficit" and "debt" are not the same thing - and when discussing the terms in regards to education, and that space between white students and students of color - we have both a snapshot gap and a substantial legacy of a debt. To use the economic analogy, every year there is an achievement gap (deficit), and that achievement gap is added to the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debt this country carries over and owes to its communities of color. The debt grows bigger and bigger and is carried over with each passing year.

Ladson-Billings contemplates what amazing work could be done if researchers, educators, administrators, parents, and politicians who are working so hard in researching, closing, fighting, and studying the gap, were freed up from that work, because somehow the debt was paid. She wonders how all that work of researching, fighting, studying, and working could be funneled to instead buoy the education for all children. And so it is suggested in this famous address, that addressing the "education debt" could be viewed as doing just that - benefiting the whole. With that refocus Ladson-Billings moves us away from education being a zero-sum game, away from allowing those who can situate themselves to care only for their own children's education, and calls it like it is: the "education debt" is a debt that works against every single

child in this country, and it is in all of our best interest to address "the education debt" in our

work, in our lives, in our research, and in our schools, in our classrooms, and in each and every

interaction with our students.

The education debt is an important concept to wrestle with when discussing Montessori

and social justice. The 100 year old history of Montessori philosophy means it has likely had a

role in the accumulation of this education debt. Ladson-Billings (2006) explains that "historical,

economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have

created an education debt." Through exploring narratives of Montessori educators, I show that

Montessori education has no doubt impacted the balance of this debt on both sides. Let us now

turn to exploring Montessori Education and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to consider the links

and congruences between the two.

Montessori Education & Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Throughout researching and writing this paper, I kept quotes taped to the wall above my

desk from Dr. Ladson-Billings and from Dr. Montessori. These quotes kept me grounded in the

discovered overlap between the two educational frameworks. Reading these words daily focused

my attention on how the two frameworks have potential to enhance one another.

Of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), Gloria Ladson Billings says, "it is a pedagogy

that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural

referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The Montessori quotes I kept near included: "For the child to progress rapidly, his

practical and social lives must be intimately blended with his cultural environment" (Montessori, 1994) and "teaching must only answer the mental needs of the child, never dictate them (Montessori, 1985)." and "instead of giving out what she has in herself, the teacher must bring out the full possibilities of the children" (Montessori, 1916).

Reading these educators in tandem caused me great pause on a daily basis, as it did when I first came across CRP. It was striking to me that this thinking, this idea, that it is not the student's culture that needs to change to fit the schools, but rather the school culture that needs to change to fit the students' seemed to me present in both CRP and in Montessori.

Once I began reading, I found a handful of researchers highlighting Montessori as a potential vehicle for CRP practices. The researchers argue that the two schools of thought experience overlap and potential (Massey, 2006; Moquino, 2002; Schonleber 2011). The following section outlines this found overlap in the literature, but first I will compare the characteristics and frameworks of Montessori education and CRP?

What is Montessori? Dr. Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator, developed her educational method through work with impoverished preschool-aged children in Rome (Lillard, 2005). Specifically, her research took place in the slums and in a psychiatric clinic (Standing, 1998). Montessori studied and meditated over the state of these children and came to believe that, "with special educational treatment, their mental condition could be immensely ameliorated" (Standing, 1998). Montessori's initial classrooms gained global attention when the students of this observation based, child-led philosophy started outperforming students from more conventional education settings (Standing, 1998). Since then, Montessori's insights and efforts in education have inspired over five thousand schools world-wide (Lillard,

2005).

The Montessori philosophy is rooted in a deep respect for all children and, what I refer to as, their location or coordinates on their own unique map of learning. American Montessori Society (AMS) outlines "hallmarks of Montessori" which I review here (American Montessori Society, n.d.).

   Multi-Age Groupings. Montessori classrooms are multi-aged, for example a child typically starts in a pre-primary classroom at age three, and will stay in that same classroom with those same teachers through their sixth year. Mixed ages allow for children to teach one another with skill and confidence, as well as allow the educators to develop deep and knowledgeable relationships with the children so that they become the experts on the students, their learning styles, successes, and needs over a three-year period. Multi-age classrooms spanning over three years allows for a sense of community to develop that is collaborative and draws on participants strengths. AMS describes this trait as: "younger children learn from older children; older children reinforce their learning by teaching concepts they have already mastered. This arrangement also mirrors the real world, where individuals work and socialize with people of all ages and dispositions" (American Montessori Society, 2016).

   Uninterrupted Blocks of Work-time. In the Montessori classroom, there are never rows of desks or bells that ring to indicate the movement to the next academic subject. Instead, children work at tables or on the floor, and with the teacher, determine the agenda and lesson structure that best suits their needs. Dr. Montessori labeled classroom activities and materials "work" after her extensive observation and conclusion that children are attracted to activities that require mental and physical exertion. Dr. Montessori believed true and deep learning transpires

when the teacher prepares a learning environment with work experiences that children crave.

During these open-ended "work times" students freely move throughout the environment

choosing different work. Montessori teachers guide the students' choices by preparing a

thoughtful learning environment. They encourage and protect periods of deep concentration,

they observe each student's interest, and they respond by preparing additional interest-based

learning activities (American Montessori Society, 2016).

     Guided Choice of Work Activity. The Montessori teacher is a scientist in perpetual

observation of her students, she/he watches for "sensitive periods" or moments that students are

best able to learn a specific material or concept. The Montessori teacher prepares the

environment to promote guided choice of work and from the perspective of the child. The

Montessori teacher does not expect children to be still, on the contrary, he/she expects movement

which is encouraged, and often part of a lesson or material.

     Because the classroom is always under modification as a result of the Montessori

teacher's observations of the specific children in the classroom that year, the classroom activities

reflect the specific students and their learning landscape at that moment in time; the classroom

evolves and changes regularly. The teacher observes constantly and therefore knows the

students well. This knowledge includes context, ability, and interest which aids in successful

guidance of the child to the specific lesson they are seeking. The educators in the Montessori

environments are better described as guides. They prepare the environment to reflect the needs

of the children and daily observe and take notes on the students in order to better prepare the

materials and the classroom. The guide observes his/her students to identify "sensitive periods"

or moments when a child may have an easier time learning a concept, and then scaffolds that

learning need with lessons and the appropriate materials. The environment changes and

transforms as the students learn, change, and their needs shift. There is no expectation that

children all perform or learn the same lesson, at the same time, or in the same way. The

environment constantly evolves and adapts to meet the needs of all the children (American

Montessori Society, 2016).

There are many more principles of the Montessori philosophy beyond those highlighted

by AMS above. These additional hallmarks include ideas about order, about observation as the

teacher's method, about aesthetically pleasing environments, about sensory rich materials, and

about unique classroom areas such as "practical life. That said, I focus on two additional

theoretical underpinnings that are important to highlight here. First, Dr. Montessori infused her

teacher trainings with the belief that children are inherently good, and that children want to learn.

She wrote extensively that there is a good, special, and vulnerable space in every child, and it is

the job as the educator to reach out to that space with love and respect. She also believed that

children have a strong innate desire to learn, and if they are presented with an environment that

calls out to that need, they will be joyful and content in their learning. Montessori believed that

teaching need not be something that is forced on children, but instead can be something they

cannot wait to do each day (Montessori, 1998). Second, I mention Dr. Montessori's teachings on

world peace through education. Dr. Montessori's ambitions for education to serve as a vehicle

for world peace is significant in this larger discussion of Montessori and social justice. Her

method aligns with ideas from the mindfulness culture of today, seeking peace on an individual

level as a path to bring about world peace - however Dr. Montessori believed education was the

vehicle to transmit this concept. The failure to achieve world peace, she maintained, was a result

of human frustration in achieving peace at a personal level. She thought that environments (such as traditional classrooms) were ill-suited to nurture the human potential and thus she strived to develop a new structure of support for nourishing individual peace using her educational philosophy (Montessori, 1949). For her work on peace through education, Montessori was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times in 1949, 1950, and 1951. Dr. Montessori viewed education as a tool for effecting social change and moving toward world peace. This agenda of social justice shows up in the theoretical underpinnings of Montessori philosophy time and time again. Now I review the literature on the venn diagram overlap between CRP and Montessori.

What is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy? Many academics have written about culturally relevant pedagogy and its adjacent terms, culturally appropriate teaching (Au & Johnson, 1981) culturally congruent teaching (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), culturally compatible teaching (Johnson, 1985), and culturally responsive teaching (Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982). Ladson-Billings is best known for her study, work, and identification of the pedagogy in her celebrated and important research and book title "Dreamkeepers" that initially came out in the mid-nineties and has since experienced a second edition (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Geneva Gaye and Jackie Jordan-Irvine are additional influential researchers who define and refine this notion of CRP, and believe that it is not the student's culture that needs to change to fit the schools, but rather the school culture that needs to change to fit the students. Irvine defines CRP as "a term that describes effective teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. It can be a daunting idea to understand and implement. Yet people tend to appreciate culturally relevant

pedagogy when they see it" (Irvine, 2010). Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively."

Ladson-Billings coined the term "culturally relevant teaching" after a three year study of successful teachers of African American Children (Ladson-Billings 1994; Ladson-Billings 1995; Ladson-Billings 2006). The term CRP describes teaching practices that are effective in culturally diverse classrooms. Ladson-Billings says CRP teachers are not necessarily similar in their concrete teaching practices, but do show similarities in their theoretical underpinnings (Ladson-Billings, 1995) to ensure the success of African American students. For example, Ladson-Billings claims CRP teachers have three criteria for teaching. The practices that meet that criteria differed across the classrooms she observed, all the criteria were met and stem from the aforementioned theoretical underpinnings. The three criteria include: 1. Students must experience academic success, 2. Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and 3. Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo.

When considering the first criteria, that of academic success, Ladson-Billings observed teachers attended to the specific academic needs of the child. One classroom example was teacher Ann Lewis who noticed several of the African American males in her class exercised strong social influence and power. Lewis worked with these boys to steer that power toward academic leadership in the classroom. This relates to the idea that African American students may view having academic success as a type of assimilation into dominant (white) culture within the African American student population, and thus resistance to academic success has been found (Fordham & Ogdu, 1986). Lewis's success in steering leadership toward academic

success was one of the ways the studied teacher ensured academic success.

Second, Dream-Keepers teachers developed or maintained cultural competence in their students. In CRP classrooms, Ladson-Billings found teachers using students' culture as a vehicle for learning. Teacher Patricia Hillard found a way to teach poetry by starting with the students' interest in rap music. Teacher Gertrude Winston invited a parent of a student, known for making excellent sweet potato pies, to hold a pie seminar where not only the science of measuring ingredients was explored, but also a marketing plan, and a history lesson ensued. A third CRP teacher allowed all home languages and dialects to be used in writing assignments, emphasizing that expressing the intent of the assignment was more important the the colloquialism used.

Finally, CRP teachers develop a "critical consciousness" in their students. "Students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Here Ladson-Billings shares the example of one of the original Dream-keeper teachers who, along with her students, critiqued out of date textbooks, sent letters requesting updated versions, and supplemented the classroom with counter knowledge to complete the lesson.

To further bring into focus CRP, Ladson Billings pulled out the following characteristics observed in a CRP teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1995):

Conceptions of Self and Others

- CRP teachers are proud to be teaching African American students and view teaching as a way of giving back to their communities.
- CRP teachers see teaching as a fluid art, not as a list of fixed practices to follow like a recipe.

- Believed in a Freirean notion of "teaching as mining" (1974, p.76) or pulling knowledge out.

- CRP teachers believe that all students can and will succeed, and that their job as teacher is to guarantee success of each student. From this vantage is the belief some students will require different amounts of attention than others, at different times in their learning, and for different subjects - and that this variance in attention on the part of the teacher is not only acceptable but appropriate.

Social Relations

- CRP teachers believe that relationships (student-student, teacher-student, teacher-community, etc) should be fluid and equitable in nature.

- CRP teachers encourage students as teachers of other students.

- CRP teachers view teachers as learners and value life-long learning.

- CRP teachers see their classrooms as a community of learners and that student collaboration is necessary and important.

Conceptions of Knowledge

- Knowledge is not static but shared, recycled, and constructed

- Knowledge must be viewed critically

- Teachers must be passionate about knowledge and learning.

- Teachers must scaffold, or build bridges, to facilitate learning.

- Assessment must be multifaceted, incorporating multiple forms of excellence

Ladson-Billings says (2006) "I presume that the work I have been doing raises more

questions than it answers. A common question asked by practitioners is, "Isn't that just 'good teaching'?" And, while I do not deny that it is good teaching, I pose a counter question: why does so little of it seem to occur in classrooms populated by African-American students?" With this question, Ladson-Billings jumps ahead to this paper's next road of inquiry, but before I explore just why Montessori classrooms are not more accessible to African American students, I will move beyond just mapping out Montessori alongside CRP practices, and work to demonstrate how these two frameworks have potential to work in tandem. I suggest that Montessori education is an established framework through which CRP could be emphasized in classrooms today. I will then return to Ladson Billing's question in the final section and try and understand the struggle to get Montessori to students of color through narratives of Montessori educators.

Is the Montessori method fertile soil for CRP? The relationship between CRP and Montessori, to me, seems organic. I wonder if their seeds are planted in near enough proximity, as this paper hopes to do, if cross-pollination will occur. The quotes that guided my research, the ones pinned to my wall, helped demonstrate this potential, as do the following studies combining CRP and Montessori. I see this seed sowing of the two frameworks as illuminating great potential, as it empowers the Montessori teacher to become fluent in CRP practice, and advocates for an already present framework of Montessori classrooms to bolster CRP practices. A CRP/Montessori link could erode some of the educational debt this country has incurred by funneling strategic CRP practices into already established settings. Here I explore how previous research has begun to sow seeds of Montessori and CRP.

Montessori as reflective. There is a small, yet growing, segment of research exploring

CRP and Montessori, most recently Michelle Yezbick investigated how Montessori educators in

one public school setting in California addressed the pluralistic nature of their students' cultural,

racial and linguistic backgrounds (2007). Six Montessori school public teachers met weekly to

explore how Montessori teachers address culturally responsive teaching. Yezbick found

potential in the Montessori approach for facilitating culturally relevant teaching practices

alongside a need to continually and constantly be engaging in self-reflective practices as

educators about race and practice in one's classroom.

Yezbick acknowledges limitations in her study due to her position as researcher and

teacher, she speculates that this position likely constrained conversations around bias and race on

the part of the teachers. Nonetheless, she says, "this work of dismantling the status quo, both

externally and internally, is a complex and demanding task but essential and worthy of our

efforts" (Yezbick, 2007). She goes on to challenge the schools to appropriately compensate

teachers for this self-reflective practice, and envisions cultivating space and time for teachers to

do their Montessori reflection specifically around race and class. Yezbick's call for for further

training and space for reflective practice around race is echoed in my analysis of Montessori

educators' narratives. I find this study significant in that it ties the Montessori teacher's practice

of reflection to a practice of specifically reflecting on cultural relevance in the classroom - thus

strengthening this relationship and illuminating an established Montessori classroom as a

potential vehicle to funnel CRP into classrooms.

Montessori as encompassing indigenous ways of knowing. Research by Nanette S.

Schonleber out of the University of Hawai'i (2011) explored why some Hawaiian Language and

Culture-Based (HLCB) educators perceived the Montessori approach to be congruent with their

goals and values. She suggests Montessori education is an example of culturally relevant

teaching. Schonleber's research consists of interviews and focus group discussions with 40

HLCB participants, including 15 key informants who had at least 180 hours of Montessori

training. Data also included classroom and school visits and analyses of school documents. The

potential impact of this study is that other indigenous educators may recognize the potential for

Montessori education to encompass broader concepts and different worldviews. Schonleber

suggests that different concepts and views easily nest within the framework of Montessori in a

more supportive manner than traditional classroom settings.

Schonleber discussed four ways in which HLCB educators perceived Montessori to be

congruent with their goals and values. First she found similar views regarding their work as a

lifestyle or what she labeled *A Way of Living.* This topic includes an intertwining between

personal values and goals and professional values and goals found by HLCB educators within

the Montessori philosophy. Second common pedagogical practices resonated including teaching

through the use of demonstration, hands-on activities, caring for the natural world, teaching

through a reality-based culturally-relevant curriculum, and basing teaching on observation. A

third area of identified overlap was shared values and beliefs as educators including: valuing

nature and the things of the natural world, valuing community and awareness of one's

responsibility to the community, valuing harmony in relationships and humbleness, valuing

work, freedom and responsibility, teacher as a guide, and the belief in education as

transformative or activist. Finally Schonleber found an overlapping world-view which included

ideas around the interconnectedness of all life. Throughout her research are HLCB quotes

exclaiming how "it all fits" or "matches" (p.166) in reference to Montessori and Hawaiian

culture and traditions. Also found in this study were ways in which goals and values were not

shared including the yearning by HLCB educators for more emphasis on culture, family, and

place than what the original Montessori curriculum provided.

   In summary, one of Schonleber's suggestions is that when a deeper paradigm is shared

between teacher and culture, as could be seen here between HLCB educators and the Montessori

framework, there may be a lessening of a home-school mismatch and teachers and students may

have an easier time understanding one another. For the purposes of my research, the idea that an

indigenous worldview paradigm can used easily within the Montessori framework is significant

for the philosophie's culturally relevant potential.

   Montessori and CRP are aligned. Corrine Massey (2006) of the University of Maryland's

research includes observing and interviewing Montessori public school teachers to understand

their CRP practices. Massey writes:

> The theoretical bases of Montessori which require the teacher to look to each child's
>
> individual needs and to build upon the extensive body of knowledge that they already
>
> possess upon entering school, to practice education as a process of drawing out what is
>
> already within the child rather than inserting knowledge into an empty vessel, and to
>
> consider the education of children as a means of achieving world peace are clearly
>
> congruent with the theoretical foundations of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. (p.4)

Similar to work by Yezbick and Schonleber, Massey finds many areas of alignment between

Montessori and CRP, she also outlines ways the two paradigms could be better aligned as well.

She found many ways in which the Montessori teachers in her study carried out tenets of CRP

including: consistently differentiated instruction, cooperative learning opportunities, learning in realistic contexts, a caring and respectful pedagogy, curriculum based on observation, teachers working to build classroom communities, building instruction around students' personal identities, and field experiences or "Going Out" opportunities. Ways in which Massey outlined areas for growth in order for Montessori to be better aligned with CRP include: all teachers setting clear and firm guidelines, engaging in critical self-reflection, develop an awareness of their own cultural selves and biases, focus directly on social action in field experiences, more focused incorporation of families into classroom communities, connect students to community, national and global identities, and add cultural identities (in addition to individual identities) to classroom praxes. Massey's work strengthens the connection between CRP and Montessori, and important step in the work of this paper.

From the review of Montessori philosophy and CRP and exploration of the literature around the potential and overlap, I see a strong case developing to argue for a fair amount of overlap between the two schools of thought in regards to practice, and possibly even more importantly a call for attention to the ways in which Montessori can be seen as a possible framework for CRP teaching practices. On the flip side, all authors acknowledge a shortfall on the part of Montessori to recognize individual and family culture, and a call on the part of Montessori teachers do deep and consistent self reflection work around bias and teaching practices. The case is strong for the potential and opportunity to view the two frameworks in tandem, as overlapping, and at times as a "match". Now...does Montessori work for African American children? The data is mixed.

Montessori Education and Student Achievement

The promise of Montessori and student achievement. More research is needed, and the jury is out on if Montessori Education positively affects student achievement, but it is promising, especially in the subject of reading. Previous studies show inconsistent results in that some cite no benefits for African American students when comparing traditional public school settings (Ansari & Winsler, 2014; Cisneros, 1994; Lopata, Wallace, & Finn, 2005). Other studies show only math being of question and reading scores consistently demonstrating that Montessori elementary education can support achievement for African American students (Dohrmann, Nishida, Gartner, Lipsky, & Grimm, 2007; Mallett & Schroeder, 2015; Moody & Riga, 2011).

New research out of the University of North Carolina - Charlotte evaluates the effectiveness of reading and math instruction for third grade African American students in public Montessori, traditional, and other school choice settings (Brown, 2016). Findings from this study are more conclusive than previous cited data in that African American students were found to perform at significantly higher levels in both reading and math in public Montessori schools than in traditional schools. However, as found previously, there were no significant differences found in math achievement between African American third grade students in public Montessori and other magnet programs, however Montessori public school African American students did outperform African American students in math in traditional public school settings. Even more dramatic, the reading group in the Montessori public schools demonstrated significantly higher reading levels than both magnets and traditional public schools. This research suggests that the Montessori method can be an effective pedagogy for African American students, particularly in

reading.

What's the hold-up? If Montessori is a potential framework for CRP teaching practices, and the data shows that Montessori public schools serve African American children at least marginally, if not significantly, better in at least reading if not in math and other subjects, why is the needle on the achievement gap not moving in the right direction? I look to the literature on two topics to answer this: the lack of Montessori public schools and, at times, the inaccessibility of the existing Montessori public schools.

There are 4000 Montessori schools in the United States, however only 500 of those schools are public schools (Debs, 2016). It would seem that a first call to action would be advocating for more charter and magnet Montessori schools. Second, is a slightly more nuanced topic, is that of accessibility. Montessori has a long and complicated history touching on possibilities about why and how Montessori has acquired the elite reputation it harbors. In some ways Montessori's history is more diverse than one might imagine, Debs (2016) cites many stories of Montessori founders of color from the 60's including Malcolm X's cousin, Mae-Arlene Gadpaille, and others who successfully founded and ran Montessori schools for years, and sometimes decades, with a belief and a focus on Montessori serving students of color. This research also cites figures that show that Montessori public schools are actually more non-white than traditional public schools - this also a surprising finding. That said, the research unpacks this figure a bit and explains that it is the magnet schools, designed for de-segregation, that serve more children of color. The charter schools that make up Montessori public schools, are actually whiter than the national public school average (Debs, 2016).

Debs concludes by advocating for better access to Montessori public schools for children

of color, and challenges Montessori charter schools to better address issues of accessibility by

providing transportation, free lunch, before and after-care, and better outreach to communities of

color with the intent to hire more diverse teaching staff (Debs, 2016). This research is significant

in that we find that getting these Montessori CRP practices to the very students that could most

benefit from it, have two huge obstacles. One is the lack of public Montessori schools that any

and all children can attend and two, is the history of even public Montessori schools being

inaccessible to particular populations.

Now that we have a grasp on Montessori and CRP, and have taken the temperature of

achievement and accessibility in Montessori education, let us turn to narratives from Montessori

educators to see how these points resonate with them, and how they understand Montessori

education's part in eroding the "education debt".

Methodology

The following study uses the method of Narrative Inquiry to explore six Montessori

educators' stories about how they view their work relating to social justice. All six participants

self identified as someone doing social justice work, and were additionally externally identified

by either participating in the recent MSJ conference and FaceBook group, and/or were identified

by one of the conference organizers as an educator in Montessori doing social justice work. All

of the interviews took place over the summer of 2016 which was also the summer of the third

annual MSJ conference. The summer of 2016 also witnessed a nation of escalating violence and

concerns about biased use of police force. Before we outline the study design, we will explore

narrative inquiry as a method including unpacking the researcher's lens.

Why Narrative Inquiry as a Method

I choose narrative inquiry as a method because it suited me as a researcher and it best suited the subject matter at hand. My background includes an eclectic history that points to narrative history as a Method. I am an award-winning poet, I have a BA in Anthropology and Women's studies from the UW - Madison, I am trained in the Montessori method, and I have spent most of my career directing a small non-profit preschool. The non-CV version of that list is: someone who is most comfortable writing creatively, who values ethnography, observation, and social justice, and who chooses to lead by listening. When I discovered narrative inquiry as a method -with its latitude for writing styles, grounded qualitative methods, attentiveness to social justice issues, and care and thoughtfulness toward participating in research - it became the most obvious method of research for me.

In addition, the subject matter seemed rightly suited to narrative inquiry. As a school director I learned that having an ear and my heart positioned toward teachers is a sure method to inquire as to what issues are most needing attention at a school-wide level. Taking a position where I listen to teachers in research seemed both natural and truthful. Collecting teacher's narratives to unpack and tease out issues that face Montessori in regards to social justice seemed both natural and obvious course of research. The experience of bringing the lens to the perspective of the teacher, and analyzing that experience, brought about themes and queries that guided this study, and hopes to project larger questions on the landscape of education,

Montessori, and social justice. With that in mind, let us review additional characteristics of narrative inquiry to further understand why it might be best suited to study the overlap and potential of Montessori and social justice.

A reflective method of inquiry. In qualitative research, narrative inquiry is a process of collecting, studying, and understanding experience through storytelling. Connelly and Clandinin (2000, 2006), pioneers in the field of narrative inquiry, talk about how lives consist of stories, and stories reflect back to us the truth about ourselves.

The act of storytelling is a thinking back, a cyclical process that loops back upon itself by using experience, memory, and the present moment to develop the narrative. This process is similar and aligned with the Montessori philosophy, a philosophy known for its process of observation, then reflection, then altering the environment, then observation again, then reflecting again, then back to altering the environment if need be - and so on - and that looping back and analyzing where the self is in that those relationships. It seems to me that a studying a philosophy with an aligned method would be a good match.

To share an example of Montessori's self-reflective nature, I remember back to my own Montessori training in the late 90's. It was there that it was explained to me, that besides observation, the main job of the Montessori teacher is to "prepare the environment", and to prepare it to meet the particular and specific group of children's needs at that given moment in time. I was also taught to consider myself, the teacher, as part of (not the head of) this prepared environment, and when a child was challenged or challenging, to look to the environment, and alter the environment, to better support that student (this was, and always has been, part of the philosophy I most admire, as before I discovered Montessori, I had not thought outside of the

teacher-directed and parent-directed scripts). This type of reflection on curriculum, practice, and self - that is based in observing your classroom and students - has trained me to be reflective as a teacher, as a school director, as a parent, and as a person. Narrative inquiry is a well suited method to reflect upon the personal stories about social justice and Montessori, and to then reflect on how those stories make up the landscape of the larger narrative in Montessori**.**

   The less heard stories. In their book, *Telling Stories*, Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett (2008) discuss historically ways in which personal narrative has been used to introduce marginalized voices into the record. While there has been much written and critiqued about who's right is it to tell which story, it cannot be denied that life stories are rare in academia regardless of who is doing the telling. The undervaluing of life story in research arenas, some would argue, demonstrates the gendered nature of knowledge production and how certain types of epistemologies are valued in research.

   Narrative as a method and a form, also challenges the cannon with the very content that it brings into focus, Maynes et. al tell us: "...the power of the analyses results from bringing new voices and previously untold stories into conversations on topics about which these voices provide invaluable witness, critique, and alternative narratives."(Maynes et al., 2008). My research speaks to this point on a few connected levels. First there is the margin of Montessori as being an alternative form of education and not often represented beyond a footnote, in the larger record of educational pedagogies. An adjacent margin would be within Montessori itself there are margined experiences including many that we will explore in this research (a majority of interviews are with Montessori educators of color and which are the minority of Montessori teachers). Also, the individuals who identify as Montessorians for Social Justice educators are a

minority within the field of Montessori, and this group often struggles to have a social justice agenda reflected on the larger Montessori landscape, for example on the agendas AMS or Association of Montessori International (AMI).

Part of the thrust of this research is to not only bring Montessori to the table of general education to consider as an alternative/margined approach when discussing furthering social justice in schools, but this research also reflects internally to see who is being marginalized within Montessori. It challenges the field of Montessori to look inward and improve upon equity and bias within the educational system of Montessori, to bring the lesser heard Montessorians, blurry on the side-lines, front and center to be heard.

To use narrative inquiry, a marginalized method, to introduce marginalized voices seems both fitting and congruent. In this study I wanted not only to work towards social change in *what* I was studying, but I want to directly and admittedly link my work to social change in *how* I am studying. Using narrative inquiry as the methodology met this goal.

Allows for many truths. Ochs and Capps (2001) also bring our attention to narrative being outside of the canon when they discuss the closed temporal and causal path of most research, and how with narrative we can allow for a more a diverse, open and an uncertain path. They urge the researcher to resist the need to wrap up and make sense of a story and suggest that non-linear narratives may do more to support authenticity (Ochs and Capps, 2001).

This wisdom brought me comfort when my research route began to change direction once I spent time with the narratives and discovered they weren't fitting perfectly into my tidy boxes. I anticipated inspiring grass-root stories of Montessori educators doing great social justice work that I could share with a larger population. I was focusing on how Montessori and CRP were

congruent, and I subconsciously used this as logic to advocate for increasing Montessori

education in the world. Through working with the narratives, studying the literature, and

attending the most recent MSJ conference - additional stories were surfacing, stories that were

not fitting in that preordained box. In addition to hearing strong and inspiring social justice

stories I was also hearing concern that Montessori settings can be biased - sometimes in the very

same narratives! These pieces of the participants stories that were not fitting in the tidy boxes at

first caused me great anxiety. I was experiencing dissonance in my decade old advocacy call

around the message of: *Montessori for All*. I then remembered that narrative inquiry does not

advocate for a closed and causal path, that it doesn't need to be tidy - and this is when my

research began to really bloom. I accepted that these different, and at times contradictory truths,

can and do exist together. Simply put I was finding that Montessori can be both good and bad

for underserved populations, and narrative inquiry really allowed me to tease out these nuances,

and spread them out for all to explore in this research.

This reminder that multiple truths can coexist echos Clandinin's work, and calls for

researchers to resist the urge for coherence, and to even go further and ask what social/theoretical

difference this research could make (2013). When coding, analyzing, and writing about these

interviews, I found Ochs and Capps message here important to revisit often. The urge to tidy up

the larger story was powerful, even now the urge to highlight the great work that is being done,

and then bullet point a clear list for areas of growth is a strong, yet I hope to stay true to this

guidance and leave the notion that the story is open-ended, messy, in process, and far from being

over - but presents a great opportunity for social change. I believe the analysis of these

narratives shows clear potential for the methodology to do great things, while simultaneously

claiming that a lot of work needs to be done on an internal level. I have come to understand (and

hope) that the story of Montessori and Social Justice will never have stamped on its final page

the end.

   Connects the individual to the social. I find *narrative inquiry* to be an exceptional way

to demonstrate how the individual experience has much to say about the larger social context.

Anthropology in its most reduced form has often been critiqued for simplifying the relationship

between the micro experiences of the individual have much to say about the macro experience of

culture. While there is danger in simplifying this relationship, I think by unpacking it and

complicating the relationship through narrative work, we may still find significance in this kernel

of exploring the individual in order to understand the larger cultural contexts - especially when

part of the individual narrative is commentary and sense making about a larger narrative, as in

the case of this study Montessori educators are asked to consider the larger work of social justice

with in Montessori, as well as how they make sense of Montessori carrying out social justice.

   Maynes et al. discuss personal narratives, and the connection of the individual to the

social in the following quote:

> Why people do what they do and their understandings of why they do
>
> what they do are typically at the center of their stories about their lives.
>
> Empirically they provide access to individuals' claims about how their
>
> motivations, emotions, imaginations—in other words, about the subjective
>
> dimensions of social action—have been shaped by cumulative life
>
> experience…They thus offer a methodologically privileged location from
>
> which to comprehend human agency (Maynes et al., 2008).

The idea that collecting and unpacking personal narratives to get at the points of individual agency about social justice and Montessori, may have some reflection on larger societal trends within the field, and is central to this research. "Once the individual life is explored in its subjective detail and temporal depth, the line between individual and social tends to dissolve" (Maynes et al., 2008). However, as Maynes et al. challenge us to do, we must move away from the over-simplified micro and macro analysis, and instead study the *interconnectedness* of the individual and the social. I am interested in moving away from a simplistic approach of simply projecting the micro larger and broader, and instead alongside those projections, also strongly consider *interconnectedness* as a way to get at the nuances and complexities that make up human nature. That said I do not want to completely discredit the micro-macro relationship in research as it is in the individual experience that clues are found to help us unearth the broader strokes of culture. These broader strokes demonstrate what understandings, concepts, restrains, and rules the individual is operating within (or perceive they are operating within). Holland et. al get at this concept with the following quote, "self-discourses and practices must be scrutinized for they are clues to the contours of the bottle—the culture—that shapes the malleable self" (Holland, 1998).

This approach of finding broad strokes, illuminating the personal narrative, while focusing on interconnectedness very much speaks to me as a true and authentic approach to getting at human motivation. It is this sensitivity to the relationship between the individual and the larger culture which includes all of its complexities, is yet another reason to utilize narrative inquiry as an approach.

Identity making. Consider the following quote:

We come to define ourselves as we narratively grapple with our own and others'

ambiguous emotions and events. As a result, narrative constructions of uncertainty as

well as certainty play an important role in configuring selves. Paradoxically, we are

perhaps most intensely cognizant of ourselves when we are unsure of ourselves,

including our memories. The tension between certainty and doubt drives narrative

activity in pursuit of an authentic remembered self (Ochs and Capps, 2001).

Identity making, I have come to learn, is inseparable from narrative, or perhaps we

should say that narrative can be an integral part of identity making. At times, when reviewing

transcriptions of Montessori educators, I witnessed the very making of identity in the real time

answer a participant.

In their chapter titled *Authoring Selves* (1998) Holland et al. discuss the work of Bakhtin

and Vygotsky around identity work, and it is there that the ideas of identity being both

developmental (Vygotsky, 1930) as well as a dialogical (Bakhtin, 1981) struck a chord with me

that resonates strongly with the song of narrative. To demonstrate my understanding of what

Holland et al. discussed, in the margins of their book I scribbled a tiny set of stairs and then

added a looping pattern crawling up the stair to represent one's path of identity making as both

developmental and reflective, and how that very relationship worked together.

Narrative, especially when reflecting back on one's life, which is what I ask here of these

Montessori educators, must travel on this reflective looping stair depending on where the

educator is at their development, how they are reflecting back to themselves at that moment, how

they perceive their development when they entered into the world of Montessori, and how they

are reflecting back on themselves during that period of their development.

Narrative is a way to get at, and shine light on, this complex relationship of identity formation for the reflective Montessori educator committed to working toward social justice. I am going to jump ahead to present some data in order to cement the importance of identity formation as an example. We will see this in the example of Zora, a Pre-K teacher who has worked in both urban public non-Montessori schools in an impoverished large city, as well as in private somewhat affluent Montessori schools in the same area. Zora is excited as this fall she has been hired for a new Charter Montessori that hopes to work on integrating a diverse and varied socio-economic population.

As we will see in Zora's narrative, her route is not linear. She travels up the stair of identity formation when she describes how her past experiences have informed who she is today, an educator who believes that Montessori education should be available for all through the public sector, and who prefers the pedagogy to supporting underserved populations over a traditional PreK methodology. That said, her path was anything but straight to get there, and it was through the looping back, self reflection, changing environments back and forth between traditional and Montessori, between impoverished and affluent schools - that we can see that Zora's course was not a neat and tidy stepping up a developmental path in identity formation. Rather, as she made her way up these stairs, she looped back and reflected, and at times as a result changed her environment - and so her trajectory was not linear, straight, or developmental. My guess is she will continue to loop, to reflect and to climb in her journey of being a reflective, thoughtful, advocate for children, for equity, and for Montessori.

Adjacently, Mayne et al. point directly to the relationship between narrative and identity

when they argue that the self is narratively constructed and embodied; and that the value of the personal narrative lies in the potential to see both the individual and the social (2008). We witness Mayne's point in all four/six interviews when we hear the urgency of these educators in how they discuss that *now* there is a need for social justice to be highlighted in and by Montessori education. This urgency is due to the participants responding, each individually, to the social pain and needed healing around injustice our country has recently experienced. Their dissection and emphasis on the interconnectedness of dynamics and temporality, multiplied by individual life and collective history, speaks to the inseparability of narrative analysis from identity work as well as the inseparability of the social from the personal.

Clandinin also approaches this concept of identity in narrative when looking at how the researcher comes to their research. Her work discusses how a researcher looks at her own stories as important, claims that empathy as a researcher is a must, and argues that our own stories will guide us to the research question (2013). Clandinin's point couldn't be more true as in this research as my narrative and identity certainly brought me to this research and are briefly shared and unpacked in a forthcoming section.

Authentic. Narrative inquiry spoke to me as a way I could do authentic research because of the way in which it unpacks research as subjective, interpreted, and encourages transparency through exposure of the many lenses through which data is viewed. The nature of the research, its reflexiveness, the attention narrative inquirers give to the researcher lens, the participant lens, the context, the matter of *what* is attended to, transcription, and translation - are a few examples of the stage setting found in narrative inquiry. I don't believe that this extensive and reflective process necessarily makes the data or findings more "true" than other research methods, rather

narrative inquiry lays out a solid foundation and discusses the compiled lens through the data is viewed, thus making the whole package uniquely authentic. Maynes et al. write "Transparency and clarity about the processes that shape the production and analysis of the personal narratives, we argue, goes a long way toward making arguments persuasive" (2008).

Narrative researchers unpack the research process in many ways. Catherine Kohler Reissman (2008) spends time discussing the care with which transcription should be handled. How taking the oral story, and putting it on the page, she claims, is interpretive and political (Reissman, 2008). In her book *Narrative Analysis,* she breaks down for the researcher the five points of intersection that interpretation, analysis, and subjectivity should be considered in researcher. She lists levels of *representation in research process* as: 1. Attending, 2. Telling, 3. Transcribing, 4. Analyzing, 5. Reading, as points in the process that must be unpacked and laid out on the table for a full understanding of the process, and which I follow as a guide during my process as a narrative researcher (Reissman, 1993). Reisman quotes *Tales from the Crib* in her later work when she says "the researcher does not find narrative, but instead participates in their creation" (Nelson, 1989). I could not find this to be more true this summer, a time when social justice was already on the table for our nation, and the MSJ conference, coupled with painful and building current events, lit this subject on fire for the participants. I witnessed this flame, participated in its tending, and did my best to record its fiery journey.

Gubrium and Holstein argue that the context is as important as the story when they say "settings are not just window dressings for texts" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). This quote is profound and calls attention to ways in which many disciplines often minimize the setting, or include it as an endnote to the story or research. We will see that the summer of 2016, and the

various cities from which the participants speak with me from, are as much a character in these

narratives as are the educators themselves. I think in particular of one participant, whom I called

for a scheduled interview, and she was frantic and emotional trying to get out the door. This

participant is an African American Montessori Educator, and she had to reschedule the interview

because she was preparing to lead a community gathering in response to the most recent police

shooting. Our brief conversation that day I will never forget. She was emotional and fearful, she

expressed insecurity that she would not be able to be what the community needed at that

moment. She was close to if not in tears. Her speech was fast and high pitched. She expressed

doubts as her skills as a leader, she was struggling with the need to step up, as this group needed

a leader and she had been asked to be it.

My role as researcher was so stretched and challenged at that moment. As a white

woman, I could not know what she was experiencing, I also had met and spoken to her a handful

of times, but we did not know each other well. However I do know what pressure feels like, and

I knew that at this moment this person needed encouragement, and I just happened to be the

individual crossing her path at this acute moment.   I had been at moments of pressure and in

need of encouragement - I found compassion, I found empathy. I shared what I admired of her

from what I saw at the conference, I shared how her beautiful prose on social media has

impacted me. We stumbled through the moment. She kept me on the line for thirty minutes.

We also discussed her safety that day as she has young children and the climate and culture those

few days after the police shootings at the Dallas rally felt anything safe. I think I did ok, she said

she was grateful. When I spoke to her days later for our rescheduled interview she said the

gathering went well. She was poised and relaxed. We did not discuss it again. I share that

moment because I believe what Gubrium and Holstein say about the setting. They say the

context, is part of the story itself, and that context includes temporal pieces as well as

geographical. I also share it as I was very aware it wasn't professional as a "researcher" for me

to act in the way that I did. That I probably should have closed down the conversation and kept

it objective. However the human in me couldn't. It has never been more apparent than when

compiling this work, that the time, space, and geographical components are part of the story.

You will hear the characters of space and time emerge in each and every narrative.

The Lenses

The Researcher. Narrative Inquiry is in part a reflective process. I think it important to

disclose the ideological underpinnings that guide my person, my work, my studies, and now my

research. This section unpacks the lens through which I view, analyze, collect, and construct the

findings of this paper. I know as an observer and researcher I impact the data. In narrative in

particular, it is a lived experience, by which the researcher is often in relation with participants,

and therefore some could argue, even more impactual. By fully disclosing my ideological

underpinnings, alongside my professional and personal identity, I hope to mitigate some of the

potential research biases for the reader by offering my lens, as well as the lens through which

participants may be viewing me. I will start by discussing my underlying goals.

Goals. There are two well worn paths of which I am very familiar with traveling in my

life, and during my last three years of being a graduate student in a department well known for

its commitment to issues of social justice, I began to really witness these two paths merge into

one paved road. One of the paths I am referring to is my passion for social justice, in particular,

my intense desire to do my part to close the gaps we see in my own community of Dane county

in regards to education and racial disparities (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families,

2013). However, through my studies at the UW, this desire has extended to wanting to make a

broader impact on the "achievement gap" and begin to focus efforts to pay down the "education

debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006) in hopes to benefit children nationwide.

      The second path is my trajectory and narrative as a Montessorian, and I have come to

realize that while this educational method, one that is becoming known for its cultural relevancy

and potential in serving underserved populations, has its own need for internal work to better

create welcoming environments and develop its training programs to be current for today.

However, I came to love the Montessori method as a framework for working with children, as a

framework for running a school, as well as a framework for living one's life - and have embraced

this approach for close to twenty years. It is a philosophy that I appreciate for its mindfulness,

thoughtfulness, and respectful approach to supporting the whole child in the educational system,

and for me, it has helped me make sense of the world.

      There are many reasons I fell in love with Montessori, let me attempt to name a few.

- I fell in love with the philosophy for its aesthetic, this includes its beautifully

  prepared environments, its children arranging fresh flowers to beautify their

  space, and that she said "The environment must be rich in motives which lend

  interest to activity and invite the child to conduct his own experiences.

- I fell in love with the teacher's role, not as the source of knowledge to pour into

  the empty vessel of a child, but to guide, to nurture, to see the beauty within each

child and to be so honored to be able to witness and support that beauty in coming out. To this Dr. Montessori said: "To stimulate life, leaving it free, however, to unfold itself--that is the first duty of the educator."

- I fell in love with her belief of education as the true vehicle of peace, and her famous quote: "Establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war." and "Of all things love is the most potent."

- I fell in love with her way of seeing the child, as a spiritual being full of magic and potential, and that our role was less to direct and more to watch. To this she said: "Do not erase the designs the child makes in the soft wax of his inner life."

At this juncture in my path as a Montessorian, and in my narrative as a Montessorian, I feel a personal need to support Montessori as a field in its growth and development, to guide it, to love it, and to nurture it to its next stage. Therefore in a sense I hope to use the method to develop the method. This parental role in my narrative may include shining a light on corners and cobwebs the method has accumulated. There are possible biases and inequities that Montessorians at times both intentionally and unintentionally may perpetuate. I wish to support the field in reconnecting with Dr. Montessori's words, to her intentions, and to separate just a bit from the interpretations that have the method stuck and unwieldy. My hope is to help to download a new version of Montessori, with new tools and features for 2016 in order to support children who are living, learning and struggling today. In summation, my two-pronged personal in need of disclosing as a researcher, is to extend the reach and scope of the Montessori method to reach more underserved populations, while challenging Montessori as a field to become more diverse, inclusive, and address internal bias.

Personal and professional identity. I am a middle-age white woman studying to complete my master's degree at the University of Wisconsin - Madison in the department of Curriculum and Instruction. For the past 19 years I have worked at a non-profit Montessori preschool that serves ages 16 months to six years old. Approximately of seven of those years I served as a teacher, and the remaining as the Head of School. I received my American Montessori Society credential from the Seton Montessori Institute in 1999, two years after I started at the preschool. I am drawn to working with adults who work with children, and have found myself in numerous adjacent roles working with learning adults. I am an adjunct professor at UW River Falls in their early childhood Montessori program, I have taught parenting classes out of the preschool and at local parenting centers, I have organized, led and taught several continuing education workshops for early childhood educators.

I am currently still the Head of School at the preschool and have three children of my own. The eldest child's story is in part how I found Montessori, as I had her when I was an undergrad at the UW-Madison and wanted quality care for her while I waitressed and finished my BA. I was drawn to alternative methods of education. I shared custody and placement of my eldest daughter with her father for most of her childhood, and struggled financially to support her and me until I remarried when she was nine. She is now twenty years old and in college herself. The second two children are school-age children who I had with my now husband. I feel this part of my narrative lends to my validity as a Montessorian, as an economically challenged single-parent, as someone who cares about developing the next generation of teachers, as someone that has seen the field of early childhood change and alter over almost two decades, and as someone who has studied education. I have both practical, classroom, parenting, theoretical,

and experiential knowledge that lends itself to this research topic.

     The Setting. The summer of 2016 witnessed increased violence and concern over

racially motivated and biased police force and violence. The incidents culminated in early July,

which happened to span the same week as the majority of my narrative interviews. The

backdrop and setting to this research includes the shooting of Philando Castille in Minnesota and

Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, who were both shot by white police officers, and both incidents

warranted concerns that the killings showed a racial bias on the part of police officers. A few

days later, during a peaceful protest over concerns about police use of force, five Dallas police

officers killed by Micah Johnson, who told police negotiators that he was upset about recent

police shootings, that he wanted to kill white people -- especially white officers. It was in the

midst of the aftermath of these three events that I held the majority of the initial interviews.

     A majority of the participants attended the Montessori for Social Justice (MSJ)

conference which I believe will be a turning point in the history of Montessori as a field. The

conference was described in Montessori Public by journalist David Ayer as "...not like other

Montessori conferences you may have been to. Different. Powerful. Hard to put your finger on

— something electric in the air…MSJ is helping to lead the movement in the 21st century

towards the long-unfulfilled promise of changing the world" (Ayer, 2016).

     The conference was held before the current event issues had culminated to such intensity,

but the climate was definitely charged, and the concern over police bias toward people of color

had been growing for years. The conference, and my training at UW, highlighted that while

racism in the police force ended at times in death, and were therefore very visible examples of

racism, that it is important look at all systems and institutions for ways that bias and racism is baked into the culture and systems. The focus on education had a shining light calling into question biased testing, biased disciplinary practices, biased enrollment practices, unwelcoming environments, and other institutional systems had been the focus of my studies, and the focus of the keynote and most workshops at the MSJ 2016 conference. I believe this backdrop to be important as in narrative inquiry, the setting, is one of the characters, and it is significant for the reader to understand the texture of the canvas upon which the following narratives were painted.

Research Design

The narratives in this study have been organized by first summarizing each personal history as it pertains to Montessori and social justicel. The next section traces a more meta-narrative of Montessori and social justice as a braided collective of these individual stories and is organized thematically.

Recruitment. Individuals were recruited through their connection with MSJ. I discovered this organization at the national AMS conference in the spring of 2016 held that year in Chicago. I was thrilled to find this group as I knew generally that I wanted to study Montessori and social justice, but finding this organization helped clarify the research focus. I made connections both at that conference, as well as the MSJ summer conference, and began to draft a list of Montessori educators whose story seemed important to hear, and whose insight I sought in helping to sort through Montessori's role in the larger landscape. This initial recruitment, and shared experiences of the conference, kept in mind certain principles of

narrative inquiry as a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through a "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The spring of 2016 I completed human subjects research training and worked on Education and Social/Behavioral Science Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Through that process recruitment emails and informed consent documents were finalized. After receiving IRB approval I began active recruitment via email to the educators I had made connections with, and scheduled almost a dozen interviews over the first two weeks in July. All of the interviews were done over the phone as the educators were spread across the country working in a variety of Montessori contexts. Two of the interviews were not individuals I had met, but rather were recommended to me by Mira Debs, MSJ founder, as MSJ members who had not attended the conference, but were doing active social justice work in their educational communities and/or had a pertinent story to tell about possible bias in a Montessori setting. One of those contacts had since left the public Montessori school he had founded, and I instead interviewed the current director.

Semi-structured interview and transcription. Once educators received initial contact, submitted the consent form, the interview was held. It consisted of guided questions which I developed with my advisor Dr. Beth Graue, and were reviewed by Professor of Narrative Inquiry, Mary Louise Gomez. Interviews spanned between 49 minutes to well over an hour. The process was in compliance with the legal and procedural aspects of ethics held by the ED/SBS IRB office which reviews all human research protocols in accordance with federal regulations, state laws, and local and University policies. Additionally, because of the relational

aspects of narrative inquiry, and because of the somewhat politicized nature of the shared

content, I raised my awareness to another level of ethical consideration throughout the interview,

analysis, and documentation process. I took a note from Lieblich instructing narrative inquirers

to move beyond the institutional narrative of "do no harm" and work to become an empathic

listener, refraining from judgment and by suspending disbelief while collecting narratives

(Clandinin & Murphy, 2007). The guided questions included:

Interview Questions
1. Tell me about yourself including your first name and where you are located.
2. How did you come to Montessori practice/philosophy
a. What needs did it fill/what choice was it against?
b. What part of Montessori philosophy/teachings do you identify most with, ring strongest for you?
3. You attended the Montessori for Social Justice Conference in Cambridge last month (you were identified by ----- as an Educator for Social Justice AND/OR you are part of the Montessori for Social Justice organization) how did social justice work become important to you?
a. how do you see your daily work fitting into the work of social justice?
4. What do you see Montessori doing well in bringing equity to education, and what does it need to work on?
5. Describe what you think is the most important characteristics of Montessori teacher?
6. Some would argue that the Montessori teaching force isn't very diverse? Why do you think that is?
7. Is there any more information, thoughts, or parts of your story about Montessori or social justice that you would like to add, or think it important to this research?

Participants had been told that I "wanted to hear their story" as well as about their work

in Montessori and Social Justice, and were therefore primed to present a narrative. Interviews

were sent to transcribing company REV for transcription. Of the almost dozen interview

requests, six full interviews were conducted, four of which were focused on for this paper, and a

remaining two to three remain in the balance for the near future.

Coding. Gergen (2003) cautions that, an "analytical method of deconstructing stories

into coded piles" could undermine "the aims of the research" by directing attention away from

thinking narratively about experience. Heeding this advice I chose to analyze each transcript in its full narrative form first and intentionally not segment the narrative. However I knew I wanted to tell a more meta story about Montessori and Social Justice, and so I began what Strauss and Corbin (1998) have called "open coding." This is a kind of micro-analysis where I assigned a descriptive label to blocks of written data. It allowed for the emergence of larger categories which became originally labeled and color coded as "external" and "internal" in the transcripts. A third theme was eventually added to these initial two, and multiple sub-themes were nested beneath each theme.

I derived the external and internal labels after that initial story reading which focused on each participant's personal narrative as a whole. After that first read, I began to develop an image that served as a metaphor which helped me sort, and later code and develop labels. The visual metaphor that began to guide my coding practice was that of a moat. The moat surrounded practices happening within classroom walls. When participants shared stories or examples of work that fell on the interior area of the moat, I coded that block as internal. Internal segments consisted of examples and stories that had to do with the methodology and pedagogy as supportive of underserved populations, and often used examples that I considered related to CRP. Internal coding also included ways in which participants compared Montessori philosophy with traditional schooling as better meeting the needs of underserved populations.

Other practices fell outside the moat of my visual metaphor, and I labeled them "external". These practices and stories included work that was happening to erode barriers to getting more children to Montessori education. These coded segments included stories about increasing access to Montessori through scholarships, increasing the number of Montessori

public schools, or picking apart enrollment processes to make current Montessori schools more accessible.

During this second coding I noticed that there were segments that didn't neatly fit in either internal or external themes. These segments seemed to touch on needs the Montessori educators had as practitioners, or that they saw as areas where educators' skills lack in the field; especially when working with a diverse and underserved population in 2016. These needs, if filled, participants seemed to be saying, would enable educators to better serve all populations. They were holes that participants identified as not being covered by their Montessori training or that their particular schools were lacking in the way of resources. Therefore, on my third read through I identified certain coded segments as "areas for growth". Each of these three themes also had further sub-themes, all of which will be covered in the section which explores the larger narrative of Montessori and social justice.

Results & Analysis

Participants Narratives

I interviewed six Montessori educators and focused on four narratives for this body of work. Four of the six educators identified as African American, the other two as white. Of the four focused narratives three were African American educators, one was male, and the remaining female. All educators self-identified as doing social justice work, some on a personal level or with classroom practices, and others on an organizational level such as organizing social justice conferences or leading rallies. Educators spanned the ages of mid-twenties to mid-forties. All

educators were located in large urban settings all over the U.S. No two settings were the same

city. All educators held at least a bachelor degree.

     Zora. Zora is an African American mother of two. She is married and I would estimate

is in her mid-twenties. She is an educator who has a depth of experience traversing both public

and private schools, as well as both Montessori and traditional schools. Her story highlights how

her professional trajectory, and the choices she has made in her career, were often a reaction to

the different educational environments she was exposed to. We see in her narrative a strong

desire to work with public school children who have fewer resources, in tandem with being a

Montessori advocate who believes in how the methodology empowers children and helps them

academically reach their full potential. We will see that the lack of school settings that provide

both the population she wants to work with while operating using the Montessori method are

non-existent, until this next fall, which has her professional history in fits and starts trying to find

her professional home.

     Zora grew up in a large city in a "majority black community", went to public school, and

then graduated from a historically black college where she studied film. She reflects back and

realizes that even though her degree was in communication she had always worked with

children. She worked in the afterschool program at a charter school on her undergraduate

campus, as well as in a Jump Start school readiness program. Her narrative includes remarks

about her family's professional origins "I come from a family of educators, my mother and

grandparents on both sides, so I tried not to really go into it because I thought it would be too

boring and too predictable, but pretty much every single job I've had since I've been able to start

working has been with children." (Interview, July 8, 2016).

After college she found herself in a program similar to Teach for America and after that teaching in a private Montessori school. "It was then that I really decided that I wanted to do Montessori. I pretty much fell in love with the school and with the approach." At this point Zora commits to education as a career and works at the private Montessori school until the amount of privilege begins to bother her. She describes the Montessori school as "great" there were "loads of resources" and the parents were "extremely supportive". She was also in awe of the academic achievement of these students "they were Kindergarteners who were...starting to do multiplication. They could read at four….they have this really amazing foundation for math". She began comparing that experience to the Charter school and to the Jumpstart program she worked at while in college. "It [the charter school] was mostly black and Latino, they had a dual language program...then just started thinking about all the resources these students had [in the Montessori school]...about my own upbringing...basically for all of those reasons I just decided no [to working at the Montessori school], I want to work with students that need more help and need more assistance. That was the reason why I decided to apply for the local fellow program" (Interview, July 8, 2016).

At this point in Zora's story she felt she made a clear choice to work in the public sector, not the private sector, and that choice of working with a higher needs population won out over working in a Montessori school. She explains that she even had an opportunity to do her Montessori training with the private school, but left wanting to make a difference in the urban city's public schools. For the next four years Zora worked as a Pre-K teacher. At the end of that four years she was pregnant with her twins and says "around that time I was already kind of thinking about I wanted to make a change...I kind of toyed a little bit with the idea about going

back for Montessori...there was a lot of political things going on in my school … that I wanted to leave." Zora's story then looped into becoming a mother, returning briefly to her classroom, and then deciding to stay home with her twins.

At this point in Zora's narrative she digresses away from Montessori and social justice themes, and focused briefly on her decision to leave the public school, and discussed the "political things" going on at that particular school. She described how the public school she taught in went through gentrification during the four years she worked there. She guessed that when she started 90% of the staff were black and 98% of the students were black. "Then slowly every single year it started to change. As people left, white teachers were hired...so the culture was changing, families were able to bring more resources.." She went on to describe how it seemed that the families with more resources were being given more privileges within the school. Zora, in her strong affinity to this school, didn't describe it in those terms, but she did describe a few examples of the more affluent families getting privilege.

> I mean, we're still a Title 1 school...so they would request to be in certain classes. Say there was a teacher that they felt aligned more with the leads, maybe they felt was more child-friendly, or following the child, had more beliefs that align more with progressive education, they wanted all their children to be in that class...even when you looked at the PTA people, they would join the PTA because of course, they have more experience with those kinds of positions. It really affected the power dynamics in my school. (Interview, July 8, 2016).

Zora shared some guilt in her role during this gentrification process, she said "In some ways I was kind of complacent in the system because I definitely benefited from it because I had

… parent requests for me and that changed the dynamic in my classroom...I have a much higher

concentration of families that are like middle class families, two parent households, I had parents

that were able to come in to do like science projects with the kids, I had parents that would

volunteer to create materials. In some ways it kind of reminded me of when I was at the private

school." (Interview, July 8, 2016).

I include this narrative about the gentrification of the public traditional Title 1 school

because I think it is an excellent example of the systems of inequity that get played out in regards

to resources in school settings. It is also specifically important to the larger narrative around

privilege and of gentrification that Montessori public schools come up against frequently. Debs

research highlights how Montessori schools are times are the impetus for gentrification in a

neighborhood (Debs, 2016), and while in some circles that is seen as good (more resources, more

businesses, etc), it is a complicated issue because privilege plays out in enrollment (who gets in)

as well as plays out in the public school in which populations get the stronger teachers or get

placed in classrooms with more resources. We see the privilege tendrils impacting the public

school in Zora's example. These nuances are present in the global educational landscape as well,

and as we often see in narrative, it is in tension that we learn so much.

The public traditional school story of gentrification was an important backdrop to Zora's

personal story as it again showed her desire to serve a higher needs population. This narrative

we hear over and over in each participant's' story, the choice the educator must make between a

supportive environment for teachers or working with a higher needs population. Zora described

feeling empathy for other teachers serving populations with higher needs when she returned from

maternity leave to discover that the dynamics of her classroom had changed. Her students were

no longer of group of families with more resources, her suspicion being "and this is just pure speculation" that she had a classroom population of families that the administration knew would not complain about having a sub for half the year. Her classroom was full of families with fewer resources, more often in poverty, and more often minority - than she had had in the past when she was the sought after classroom. It really opened her eyes to the inequity of the situation "I left. I left and then a lot of these issues, they just weighed really heavily on me" (Interview, July 8, 2016).

During her time off with her young babies and out of the classroom, she began volunteering at a local organization that worked to bring social justice and change to education. "I started to work with them on their anti-bias early childhood curriculum." Her volunteer work, her former public school students, and her experience with a program called Tools of the Mind, had Zora thinking a lot about executive functioning skills and self-regulation, which brought her back to thinking about Montessori. "I started to do more research in Montessori and I just really felt like it spoke to me more" "this [executive function and self-regulation] is like what Montessori does, and this is what she believes in, and these are really specific reasons why she does those things" (Interview, July 8, 2016).

When Zora enrolled her twins in a toddler Montessori program she continued to reflect on the strengths of Montessori "I was just even amazed with that, just by how it really helped with their independence with those kind of skills." Highlighting the biographical aspects to Zora's narrative brings us to today, where Zora is employed at a charter Montessori school starting this fall, and is currently undergoing her Montessori training. "I went to public school for a reason...the intention of the school was to really serve lower income families" (Interview, July

8, 2016). Zora expressed concerns that her current school will move away from these goals, and follow a similar narrative as her first public school gentrification story where education disparities became even more extreme, but she remained hopeful and remarked about the Montessori charter school's awareness on the part of the administration regarding the potential challenge of gentrification undermining the goals. She said "they've talked to me several times about it, so I think that there is an awareness about it and definitely a desire to work that out. I really want to be a part of that"(Interview, July 8, 2016).

Alice. Alice had worked in traditional public schools in poor communities for over twenty years before she found Montessori. She discovered Montessori when her sons began attending a local private Montessori school in the midwestern college town where she lived and taught. It is at that time that she collaborated with her child's Montessori teacher to become the founding board member of a new Montessori school in the area to focus on serving children in poverty. Alice's unique perspective of working first in the public school setting with impoverished and disadvantaged youth to eventually opening a Montessori school to serve a similar population, sheds an interesting light on the motivations behind why one would consider Montessori as a supportive approach for a disadvantaged and under resourced population.

Alice is a white woman in her 40's. Her husband is an attorney and they have two children. Alice has been an educator for two decades. Alice explained that she originally got into teaching to work with disadvantaged groups. She received an English degree from a big ten university and then worked for Teach for America, teaching high school in the mid-nineties in a large southwest metropolitan inner city. She then taught middle school on and off for the next fifteen years in both rural and big city urban settings, but always with children at or below the

poverty line. When her children started attending a Montessori school she was teaching remedial reading at the public, non-Montessori, middle school "which means I was teaching low income kids because they're generally the kids that can't read" (Interview, July 8, 2016). When asked about her connection to social justice, Alice explained it can be seen in her constant choice to work with struggling populations. She said "Remedial reading is kind of a social justice issue" (Interview, July 8, 2016).

Before becoming the current director at the new Montessori school, and while still teaching remedial reading, Alice found herself contemplating the Montessori philosophy due to her son's' attendance, "I just kept having the thought like, boy it's really hard to teach a thirteen year old to read, but if you had him when he was three he sure wouldn't be so mad about this." Alice took note on how she saw Montessori, in addition to academics, teaching life empowerment skills, she says:

> They [public middle school students are so turned off by school of course because they are really not successful and they can't navigate. ... [Montessori has] this is how to be a person lesson. Like how to shake your hand and look in your eye and keep your pencil with you and organize your folder. I mean there are so many skills executive function wise...the executive function piece is what to me is the key to success on so many levels for children. Montessori just presents in such an elegant way how to develop independence, how to develop executive function, how to complete a task, how to get organized...the more you teach kids who are struggling who are teenagers, it's just glaringly apparent that early childhood education is actually the answer to so many parts of what's going on. (Interview, July 8, 2016).

It was during this time that her son's teacher approached Alice and her husband to help him start a Montessori school that would serve extremely socio-economically disadvantaged children in a "traditionally black, traditionally poverty stricken neighborhood" (Interview, July 8, 2016). Alice and her husband helped with the school's administrative and legal startup pieces. The school concept was to have radical sliding-scale fees where only 25% of students would pay full tuition, 25 % would go for free, and 25% would pay a sliding scale, the remaining makeup would be covered by grants. The school opened in 2009 with 4 students and has now grown to 20. After receiving her Montessori training, Alice now works at the school as both the school director and a co-teacher.

Paul. Paul has the unique perspective of being a male, African American, early childhood, Montessori educator. He currently is a Montessori teacher at a diverse public Montessori school in a large inner city. His narrative, and where it intersects Montessori and social justice, is in the realization that his sheer presence in this field is an act of social justice. As we will see in his words, his presence offers a counter narrative to the media images of African American men, and is in that sense an act of social justice. Paul acknowledges that this work is important in both poor and affluent classrooms, and in both diverse or homogenous classrooms.

Paul grew up in the inner city of one of the largest cities in the midwest. Of his childhood he said "I was blessed enough to have both a mother and father involved in my life and in the process of raising me. What was of very great importance in our household was both the idea and the affirmative that we would be going to college, and that was something that was instilled very heavily, particularly by my father, because both my father and mother are college

graduates, it was assumed that we would be going as well" (Interview, July 9, 2016).

Paul graduated from a state university with a bachelor's degree in journalism, but described realizing early on that the lifestyle of a journalist, operating under deadlines, was not going to be a good match for him. After college he decided to pursue a childhood dream of moving to one of the largest cities in the U.S. When asked about his experience living in this giant city Paul said,

> ...it is an understatement that it is not easy being here. I am both excited and way daunted to see what the rest of my years look like because these past five years have been the most challenging I've ever experienced and they've stretched and broken and put me back together in so many different ways (Interview, July 9, 2016).

In one of the greatest metropolitan cities in the world, Paul found himself studying to be a teacher. Of the program he said,

> …[this city] has, if not the largest, one of the largest public school systems in the country. What they have is a very popular, accelerated teaching, education programs...it makes it very easy to get into public education very quickly. The trade-off is you, for example, become a teacher in a 'high needs' school…you can become a teacher, you can get your certification, and you can get your master's degree for free as long as you stay in this particular challenging setting for a certain amount of time. That was my first taste into education."(Interview, July 9, 2016).

Paul didn't finish this program, but was grateful that it led him to the next thing where he worked with after school and summer programs doing literacy enrichment and baseball basics for young children. There were kindergarteners in this program and that is what led Paul to early

childhood.

Meanwhile Paul's good friend and public middle school teacher became very disenchanted with the direction traditional public schools were going, and she began working at a public Montessori charter school. Observing her experience, and through conversations with his friend, Paul became interested in Montessori and was also eventually hired at the Montessori charter. Paul is now going into his third year at the Montessori charter and is a trained Montessori educator. Paul described the initial attraction of the Montessori school as a consistent job with the opportunity for upward mobility, but that "I didn't really know what I was getting into until I was there...it was getting a crash course and this was upper elementary ...so first through third grade...there was so much that was unique and surprising to me" (Interview, July 9, 2016).

Paul went on to describe the many differences he noted between the public school he worked at that was non-Montessori and the Montessori charter, even though they were in the same district and serving the same demographic. He says,

> One was the mixed age classrooms. Two the fact that the children were given so much freedom. Three, the radical difference in the socio-emotional behaviours of the children as they interacted with each other compared to the other [school that Paul worked in that was not Montessori] public school that was literally a few blocks away that I worked at. There was just a dramatic shift that I noticed in the way that the children spoke with each other. There was a lot more critical thinking demonstrated in just the vocabulary that they used and in the way they cared for each other (Interview, July 9, 2016).

When discussing this first exposure to Montessori Paul said, "All of that was just a breath

of fresh air, including the environment itself" (Interview, July 9, 2016). Paul also felt

comfortable in the Montessori setting as it seemed to match his more introverted, and less

teacher-directed, personal style to teaching, he says, "little did I know that Montessori

philosophy kind of allows for, yes the nurturing of the child toward adulthood, but done in such a

way that you're still demonstrating a level of respect to that child as they go through the process"

(Interview, July 9, 2016).

When he discussed his commitment to social justice, unlike previous educators, Paul as a

male teacher of color didn't necessarily see his social justice work having to pertain to a specific

community and demographic of students. He touched on Montessori's ideas of meeting every

child where they are at as important, and within this segment of his narrative we see him

acknowledge the important work that also must happen with affluent populations if we are to

work toward social change.

In this following quote we see Paul unpacking for himself both explicit and implicit

concepts of his work as an African American male in early childhood committed to social

justice. His explicit examples include how he viewed a Montessori teacher having social justice

responsibilities, regardless of the population they work with, and he explains how Montessori

has an elegant way of making this possible within the structure of it's method.

Implicitly in the following quote, I also see Paul working through the importance of

putting an African American nurturing male in front of both lower socioeconomic classes of

children, as well as affluent populations to provide a counter-narrative to biased and media

portrayals of African American males in our culture. Furthermore, is the importance of having a

nurturing African American male teacher in front of children of color, as well as in front of white

students to again counter the biased and racist stereotypes. In addition to the idea that

Montessori works well with all populations when working on issues of social justice, I think it

important to note that his sheer presence in all of these environments is, in itself, an act of social

justice. To these points he said,

> While my mindset is not staunchly, "Let me go into a public Montessori so that it brings
>
> about education equality." I want that, that's not the driving force of how I do things. I
>
> know that whatever group of children that I am placed in front of, that group of children
>
> will one day grow up. That means that whether I happen to be in a lower socioeconomic
>
> area, which I am in presently both living in and working in, I'm going to teach in a way
>
> that would bridge the gap that they're facing at that moment. 'Yes, there is war in so
>
> many ways and there are many battles and there are many challenges, but you have
>
> within yourself an ability to think critically and to work with other people to produce a
>
> peaceful society.' That's that side. If it were the case, and most likely will be the case in
>
> the future, of working in perhaps like a private school that's in a more affluent area...they
>
> have that sort of intrinsic value and worth ...they are in a place where it's highly probable
>
> that outside of the classroom they're still getting cognitive stimuli through where they
>
> live.... What I would have to deal with is creating conversations, at a level that children
>
> would understand, that they are in a place in which they can make change for those who
>
> are like them, but are for whatever reason in a very difficult circumstance (Interview, July
>
> 9th, 2016).

Meanda. Meanda is an educator in a public Montessori school who is passionate about

exposing institutional and systematic racism, and making the world a better place for her

children. Meanda works as a Family Partnership Coordinator in a public Montessori elementary

school where she estimates 60% of the student body is African American. Meanda is African

American married female with young children. I estimate her to be in her late-twenties/early

thirties. She lives in a mid-sized northeastern city, home to an ivy league college.

She explained her role as Family Partnership Coordinator at the Montessori school to

"bridge the gap that we felt that we had in the first year of bringing on families that don't

necessarily look like everyone else" (Interview, July 9, 2016). Prior to that, she worked in what

she described as a "modified Montessori school" serving the early childhood age. Meanda

entered into Montessori right out of college and found a school seeking applicants from a

Craigslist ad, she claims she fell into the Montessori world, but describes feeling very fortunate

in that she had a good mentor her first year in Montessori and began researching the method on

her own. What really impressed her and attracted her to the philosophy was the foundation of

preparing the environment and the level of respect for the child.

> I think the beauty of Montessori begins with the respect of the child and the respect for
>
> the environment….if you prepare an environment so beautiful, and so inviting, how
>
> beautiful would that be for a child to come in every day and see that....what's important
>
> about being in a Montessori school is the fact that children are supposed to be
>
> respected..they're respected and I feel like Maria Montessori gives them that freedom to
>
> create their own community, which is so big in the world that we live in today. If we
>
> have that type of community in every one of our classrooms, how powerful would that
>
> be? (Interview, July 9 2016).

Meanda explained how social justice has always been a part of her life. "It's always been kind of etched in my bloodline, to kind of be outside of myself, and constantly being aware and constantly being conscious of institutional racism, and systematic racism" (Interview, July 9, 2016). She described how she protested often in college and participated in a twelve day hunger strike. When considering social justice and her role as an educator, she said, "I think it goes like an ocean to the river, like a river to the ocean. It is very much fluid in that way because when you think about education, you think about social justice, for me especially being an educator who wants to radically empower children to learn and be capable of that" (Interview, July 9, 2016).

As Meanda's identity has developed and she has become a mother, her commitment to social justice issues deepened, and this is where she finds herself now, as an educator that helps a public Montessori school be a welcoming and inclusive community.

> It's even more important now that I am a mother because now I need to be able to- I want to be able to tell my children when they get older that I made a better community for them and for their children. If I can do that in one small way, my legacy isn't in vain and they'll know that their mama did the best that she could to make a better life for not only herself and her children, but for the community that she is a part of (Interview, July 9, 2016).

The Meta-Narrative of Montessori education and Social Justice

When coding the narratives, three themes emerged in how Montessori educators viewed the potential and overlap of Montessori and social justice work. These themes I have labeled as

"internal", "external", and "areas for growth." I believe these stories to be significant, varied, and intriguing as documentation of the strength that can be found in the overlap of social justice work and Montessori. Alongside and within these stories, we also hear a call for internal work to be done in Montessori in order for educators to be better equipped and trained to work the diverse the populations of our world today.

I have worked with teachers in the field for nearly two decades, and have learned that while a teacher's experience may not be a *capital T truth*, their stories and experiences certainly are *a truth*, and each truth must be inspected and teased out for its individual threads. To continue on this weaving/fabric metaphor, I find it significant that there are common threads in each of these individual narratives, and through coding and analysis, I have begun to weave together these threads to create a stronger, more durable textile. This textile becomes what I refer to as the Montessori and Social Justice backdrop, and provides the landscape or setting that I hope to present to both the Montessori community to strengthen and alter practices, as well as the larger educational community to aid in seeing the potential Montessori approaches could bring to the social justice and equity conversation happening today.

Internal -teaching practices. First I will discuss the ways in which internal practices that relate to the overlap of Montessori and social justice, emerge in the data. By internal, I refer back to my visual metaphor of the moat. Internal practices refer to practices, issues, and experiences that happen inside current Montessori classrooms that educators understand as furthering social justice issues, work, or experiences. I call these heart practices. The internal themes explore how the Montessori philosophy inherently supports social justice work through its methodology and approach. The following sub-themes emerged in the data as participants

shared how they understood the relationship between Montessori and social justice. The

sub-themes we will discuss center around reading, self-regulation/executive function skills,

community building, and culturally relevant practices which include ideas about movement.

These internal sub themes focus on ways in which these educators see Montessori as supporting

impoverished and under resourced students, in comparison to traditional public school settings.

Reading. We see the first internal sub-theme emerged around reading skills in Alice's

narrative. Alice, who spent the majority of her career working with older students in

under-resourced traditional public school settings teaching remedial reading, developed her own

theory that if children could be successful earlier on in reading, we may be able to avoid reading

struggles in their later years. However, I find it interesting that she did not necessarily attribute

the Montessori reading materials and lessons to what brought about the reading success for these

students, but instead she discussed how the Montessori classroom aids students in the ability to

concentrate and be organized, and it is those skills which make the reading journey successful.

She said, "you really can't pay attention to learn how to read or whatever unless you have those

other skills" (Interview, July 7, 2016). She goes on to say, "Montessori just presents in such an

elegant way how to develop independence, how to develop executive function, how to complete

a task, how to get organized. All that is so important and without it you know I think we're

missing the ball on just spilling phonics to kids. It doesn't work" (Interview, July 8, 2016).

Self-regulation/executive function skills. These ideas that the tools of concentration,

empowerment, and executive function are significant ways in which Montessori supports

impoverished populations became a secondary sub-theme. Zora recognized the lack of self

regulation and executive functioning skills when she taught in a traditional school setting after

working previously in a Montessori. In the public school she helped implement a type of add on

program that hoped to bring executive function skills to certain populations in the school setting.

It was then that she reflected back on her Montessori experience and began to realize the

importance of gleaning these skills early on. She said,

> so that program [the public school add-on] was supposed to focus on building skills for
>
> self regulation. That's when I started just experimenting a little bit with what I was doing.
>
> It just started to really dawn on me like how big of a deal self-regulation was. How can I
>
> get back to this? Anyways, it made me really care about self-regulation, it made me really
>
> start caring more about the importance of critical thinking, care more about the
>
> importance of learning independence ...how do all these different things work and
>
> because of that I started to continue to go back to the Montessori classroom that I used to
>
> work in (Interview, July 7, 2016).

Alice echoed this sentiment when she said "executive function piece is ...becoming more and

more apparent to me that that is actually the key to success on so many levels for children" (July

8, 2016). When I asked Paul what he thought Montessori was doing well he also included

self-regulation in that list, he said "If Montessori education is heightened to more

populations..they can have their bodies and their emotions under a certain level of control. I think

it will mitigate a lot of the other challenges" (Interview, July 9, 2016).

I think it important to follow a tangent here in my interview with Paul, as at this point in

the interview we went off course a bit as I sense he wants to reflect on the idea of regulating

emotions for certain populations of students, specifically African American students. He

acknowledged that the concept of regulating emotions is a loaded topic when talking about

African Americans, I considered this when thinking of stereotypes we are often fed of the angry

black man or woman. Paul shared with me his analysis of the current events of that summer, and

how he saw the need for emotions, and the need for creating space for emotions, as an important

piece to our nation's struggle. His following commentary I include out of fidelity to the

temporal nature of narrative inquiry, and the significance that when we are talking about students

needing self-regulation, that that does not mean we are saying that there are not instances that

warrant passion, anger, and even unregulated emotion. Of that summer's then recent shootings

and subsequent response from Black Lives Matters groups Paul said,

> I'm kind of the mindset that emotion is needed in this situation. There is ... people were
>
> killed when they shouldn't have been killed, both the police officers and the black men.
>
> There should be anger, but the thing about anger is that ... I forget the book that I read, I
>
> think it was a counseling book, that talked about anger being this sort of secondary
>
> emotion, that there's something underneath the anger that needs to be flushed out more. If
>
> a movement is started and sustained by anger only, then the only outcome is destruction
>
> because of the way that we do anger. Unless there are other emotions involved. There's
>
> not just justice, there's revenge (Interview, July 8, 2016)

Community building. Meanda discussed an adjacent sub-theme to executive function

skills when she talked of Montessori teachers empowering students and families. She said "The

most important thing about being a teacher is being able to empower families." Empowering

families leads to the idea of community building, a sub-theme I found peppered throughout these

narratives. Community building can be seen in Montessori's *Cosmic Curriculum* which is a

lesson for six to nine year olds, many of these educators either directly referenced the *Cosmic*

Curriculum as scaffolding to building community, or referenced principles from this part of the philosophy (Montessori, 1985). For example, Meanda talked about putting together an article for her staff that tied processing the current violent events to our roles as Montessori teachers, she said, "I was going back to Montessori philosophy and she was saying, 'The most important thing about being the teacher is knowing the universe, and knowing the part that you play in it' You can't teach unless you know that for yourself. So, self-care and social, emotional learning is so important, not only for the children but for the people that work with children" (Interview, July 10, 2016). When Paul compared the two urban public schools he worked at, located just blocks from each other, he remarked of the public Montessori, "there was just a dramatic shift that I noticed in the way that the children spoke with each other. There was a lot more critical thinking demonstrated in just the vocabulary that they used and in the way that they cared for each other (Interview, July 9, 2016).

Cultural Relevancy. Finally I think it important to bring the teaching practices back to the early analysis of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), and while these educators in the classroom day in and day out may or may not use the term CRP, I found many examples within each narrative that referenced CRP related practices, again suggesting Montessori be considered as an established vehicle for this thoughtful approach to education. When Paul discussed his Montessori teacher training program, which took place after many years of working in different public school settings, he did not exude a surprise at the Montessori method's approach, but rather a sort of resonation or affirmation. He said of his teacher training, "That experience was ... It wasn't shocking in the sense that 'Oh wow this new philosophy, this is beautiful, this is awesome.' As I read more about it, it was just like, 'Well yeah this makes perfect sense why

[crosstalk 00:19:26] The shock was more how is it that all that we know about humanity, and how we work, that this hasn't become more mainstream. Just in the way that teachers are taught and go about walking alongside their students" (Interview, July 9, 2016).

This is one of my favorite quotes, because for me it really described both CRP and Montessori approach when Paul conjured this image of teachers walking alongside their students. Meanda brought it back again to the family, and referenced cultural relevancy when she is asked what Montessori does well. She replied, "It's about culturally understanding where geographically, economically, emotionally where our families are coming from" (Interview, July 9, 2016). Paul also referred to the teacher's role as meeting the student where they are, and not the other way around. He discussed how his role as the Montessori teacher must adjust when addressing issues of social justice, depending on if he is working with an affluent population or a more under-resourced population, and that it is the teacher's job to alter the curriculum. He said,

I know that whatever group of children that I am placed in front of, that group of children will one day grow up. That means that whether I happen to be in a lower socioeconomic area, which I am in presently both living in and working in, I'm going to teach in a way that would bridge the gap that they're facing at that moment. Yes, there is war in so many ways and there are many battles and there are many challenges, but you have within yourself an ability to think critically and to work with other people to produce a peaceful society. That's that side. If it were the case, and most likely will be the case in the future, of working in perhaps like a private school that's in a more affluent area...they have that sort of intrinsic value and worth ...they are in a place where it's highly probable that outside of the classroom they're still getting cognitive stimuli

through where they live.... What I would have to deal with is creating conversations, at a level that children would understand, that they are in a place in which they can make change for those who are like them, but are for whatever reason in a very difficult circumstance (Interview, July 9th, 2016).

Also in regards to CRP, I heard Zora discuss meeting students where they are, and drawing from their strengths, when she talked of Montessori's encouragement of movement in the classroom. When comparing that to her Pre-K teacher experience in a non-Montessori public school she said, "A lot of boys that they're young, they're four, I still do not believe that four-year-olds should be sitting down all the time."

To understand Zora's point, let's briefly review Montessori's ideas around movement in the classroom. It is important to note that regardless the age grouping, in Montessori classrooms, there are not rows of desks with the teacher in the front of the classroom. Instead there are what could be called, learning stations, and the teachers, or guides as they are more and more being called, come to the child's learning experience to support that experience at exactly where the student is at in his/her learning continuum, and the teacher meets them there literally and figuratively with the lesson.

Many of the Montessori materials involve movement, and there are also many options as to where a student may want to do their work in the classroom, including with another student, at a desk, at a table with others, or sprawled on the floor. In the classrooms in the school I work at, we have several standing (and wiggling) desks available as a choice, as well as chairs with different textures and/or stimulation to meet various sensory needs. The child can therefore choose which learning environment will best suit his/or needs for the task at hand.

The discussion of movement as meeting a child's needs in the classroom, reminds me of the first time I observed in a Montessori school. It was prior to when I received my own Montessori training, and I observed a boy of about four or five years old sprawled out on the floor doing a complex math work involving many beads, a clipboard, and a pencil. He would do some computing with the beads and then write something on the worksheet. He would then roll half way across the room and then roll back to where his math work was, and then do another computation. Not only did that skillful teacher not limit his movement and rolling in the room, but I saw her advise a young girl who was setting up a floor material, to notice where So and So was rolling, and might she consider another area to work? I also remember knowing in my gut at that moment that there was no way that boy would have been able to do that work unless he was allowed to roll.

While I didn't find a plethora of examples in the narratives of Montessori overlapping with CRP in how they brought culture and a child's home-life into the classroom (and in fact we will hear some of this suggested in the areas for growth section), I do think it significant to acknowledge how this philosophy is geared, and perceived by the educators, as an excellent vehicle for a CRP approach. If Montessori teachers' practices are based on the foundation that teachers should meet children where they are at, and that that children are a wealth of knowledge and wisdom, and that it is the teacher's role to support and nurture the development of that knowledge and wisdom creating space for it to flourish, and that empowerment is part of the approach - I conclude that there is already this established vehicle in the Montessori method through which to transport CRP. It would take extensive training and translation on the part of Montessori communities to add and flesh out CRP practices, concepts, and suggestions into the

teacher training, my belief is that this could be a seamless and elegant process- thus enhancing those classroom practices that take place inside the moat for underserved populations by strengthen the connection between CRP and Montessori.

That said, how to get past the moat? That is the section we will address now, in the external theme discussion. Here we find that not only is the moat thick and heavy with systemic and institutional practices that make it unwelcoming and biased toward some students and teachers, for some, even getting to the moat's edge by finding a public Montessori school is a challenge. We will first discuss external themes found in the discussions around Montessori and social justice before we launch into the ways in which Montessori can grow and areas it needs to address if it is committed to getting back to serving the populations from its original inception.

External - more than teaching practices. There were two categories I found that Montessori educators worked within to further social justice causes outside of classroom practices or what I coded as "externally". The external sub themes are either working to make Montessori more accessible to all populations, and/or choosing specifically to teach in struggling communities as opposed to more affluent communities.

Accessability. When discussing private schools, whether early childhood or elementary, the financial barrier is a main obstacle to accessibility. Financial barriers will also be discussed in the upcoming section on areas for growth when we explore these educators' thoughts on possibilities, but here let's look to how many of these educators concretely work to break down this financial barrier in their daily work. Alice's narrative is very fruitful on this front, to refresh this narrative, Alice was part of opening a Montessori school with the intent to make the Montessori form of education accessible to impoverished groups. In the particular geographical

area where Alice lived, it had to be a private school as there had been no successful attempts to

open a public Montessori in this district. The school Alice helped to open served its

neighborhood, which Alice described as a "traditionally a black, traditionally poverty stricken

neighbourhood" (Interview, July 8, 2016), and some of the children had incarcerated parents.

The financial model was a radical sliding scale fee where 25% of the families paid full tuition,

25% of the the families paid no tuition, and the remaining families paid a sliding scale fee. Alice

worked to secure grants to fund the remaining shortfall. The school opened in 2009, and while

still small (at the time of this writing it served only 20 kids) Alice discussed the potential of

growth on the large piece of property the school occupied which is rented from one of the

Montessori family's. Alice's story is inspiring as a Montessori school that worked against all

odds to address access issues including both location (opening in the neighborhood it hopes to

serve) and funding (providing free and reduced tuition). As we will see in the areas for growth

section, as well as in recent Montessori history research (Debbs, 2016) the double barrier of

money and location are listed again and again as something the Montessori community must

address if it is to reach a more diverse community. But here we continue the focus on the the

strengths emerging from the data.

        To return to Alice's story, we see implicit in this narrative the idea that there is a shortage

of Montessori schools nation-wide. As a unit of analysis, let's consider for a moment the sheer

number of public Montessori schools, which theoretically are accessible to a more diverse

population than private schools. David Ayer, of *Montessori Public*, summarizes the data for us

in a recent review of Deb's research. He says "public Montessori programs got started in the

mid-1960s, and have grown to about 500 in operation today (out of about 5,000 Montessori

schools in all). For comparison, there are about 50,000 public schools in the U.S., so

Montessori, while it is the single largest alternative pedagogy in use, still reaches about 1% of

public school children" (Ayer, 2006). From Ayer's quote it is safe to say that there are not a lot

of Montessori schools attempting to serve non-affluent populations, and therefore it could be

viewed that the sheer act of opening a Montessori school with intentions to serve a population

that is not middle or upper class, is in itself an act of social justice work, as can be seen with

Alice's conception of her school and work.

When I asked Meanda what the field of Montessori is doing well in regards to social

justice she said "I think what they're doing well right now is being present in a public sector"

(Meanda, Interview, July 9, 2016). Meanda's point is worth noting because while Montessori

schools are only a small percentage of public schools, there are 500 public Montessori schools in

this country, which is significant when one considers the amount of red-tape, negotiating, and

struggle it takes to start one, and how that number has been rising dramatically over the past two

decades (Debs, 2016).

Where to teach. In many of these narratives, the sheer act of choosing to teach a lower

socioeconomic population, is at times, viewed as an act in social justice. Alice has always chosen

to work with economically challenged populations. She says, "that's the population in many of

the years of my teaching that I was teaching just because of the schools that I chose. I mean I

taught in the inner-city part of [name of city] and then the rural district - didn't even really know

anything about. A lot of the same stuff is going on. It's just kind of different faces of it...remedial

reading is kind of social justice issue. I mean it's just those are the kids who can't read"

(Interview, July 8, 2016).

Zora talked about an adjacent struggle I heard again and again in these narratives. It is the struggle of trying to find their professional home as MSJ educators often need to choose between Montessori and the population of students they would like to commit their work to. Zora talked of the potential of her new position, and the possible fusion of being able to both work from the Montessori philosophy, and with her chosen population of students. She said,

> with this new position I'm really excited and I'm really hoping everything works out because I went to public school for a reason, there's a reason for it. When I started looking for jobs to go back, I started looking at private schools just because they were teaching in a way that I felt more at home with, or in a way that I wanted to grow. I was like no, but this is not really what I want to do (Interview, July 8 , 2016).

Zora's comments, along with Paul, Meanda and Alice, suggest there are more educators out there experiencing this struggle, more Montessorians committed to working with struggling populations as an act of social justice, but are forced to choose between pedagogy and the student population they would like to work with.

Areas for Growth. When I came up with my initial research question: *how do Montessori educators that work in social justice understand the overlap and potential of the two frameworks?* I now admit that I subconsciously anticipated narratives and rich examples of unknown heroes doing grassroots work in Montessori working for social justice change. I wanted to shed light and buoy the connection of Montessori and CRP to show its potential and current overlap with social justice work. I intended to take back this precious commodity from the rich, and bring it back to the oppressed. I cast my own future narrative toward being a

modern day Robin Hood of sorts.

This narrative, which I am just now unpacking under layers of the grad student, Montessorian, and researcher lens - was problematic on so many levels. First, it used a well worn and troubled narrative of the white woman being the hero by bringing resources to the underserved. This problematic narrative depicts poor and minority students as having a deficit and in need of saving. It is a model I work against daily in my work in Montessori and as a grad student, as I harbor a belief that students are a wealth of knowledge and insight, and that a teacher's job is to discover that, and to bring it out.

The second problem was that I had only created figurative boxes to showcase Montessori as a potential unsung hero. I did not know where to put critiques and counter narratives to this story. Very early in the work, I began to hear a quiet rumble of a bigger story that needed to be told about Montessori and social justice, that while yes, the world needed to hear about these cases and examples of potential, it also needed to hear about growth that needs to happen in Montessori. It was at the MSJ conference that this rumble turned into a roar that could not be ignored.

Ironically, I was in Cambridge to make connections with grassroots educators in order to schedule interviews, to collect narratives, and highlight stories showcasing great Montessori for social justice work happening - instead I came away with stories of injustice happening within this philosophy that I loved. However, during these two conference days, when I began to witness again and again pain, struggle, and conflict over race, class, and other identities, I began to make space for all of these truths, and accepted the complexity and often contradictory nature with which the story was coming forth. And so alongside my figurative boxes titled "Montessori

as a vehicle for social justice" I arranged new boxes, filled with stories happening with in

Montessori schools, classrooms, and by individuals that suggested bias, racism, and exclusion

may be baked into some of the systems and institutions of Montessori.

Why these stories came to light at so many junctures of this conference - in the keynote

address, in the break out session, in informal conversation, and even in impromptu poetry over

the lunch hour - is a mystery. It may have been the rawness of the larger contextual backdrop of

the violence and questionable practices toward people of color that had hit our screens that

summer. It may have been the safe space that the committee organizers created, it may have

been that there were gathered in Cambridge Massachusetts more Montessori teachers of color

than likely have ever gathered in one space. Regardless the reason, there were these counter

narratives I would bump up against - counter narratives that were calling, and perhaps screaming,

for reform to happen with in Montessori.

I, reluctantly at first, began to open to some stories that Montessori, as a field and

practice itself, was perpetuating this gap between the haves and the have nots, it was not just the

elite keeping resources from the poor, but intrinsically in the philosophy there is a need to

investigate practices, language, and barriers that may be directly counter to the very social justice

work many of us hope Montessori will remedy. This is a two prong work I now see, one is to

showcase the vast potential of this philosophy and to suggest it not being used to its fullest

potential, and the other one of the prongs is to begin serious work to unpack and root out

systemic oppression that may be happening internally.

With the MSJ conference as a backdrop, the narratives I collected looped back to internal

injustices right alongside singing Montessori's praises. I also choose to develop additional

guided questions to get at these educators' thoughts on how the field could improve, and I have

developed this section titled *areas for growth* to explore, in a hopefully encouraging way, how

Montessori as a field could consider developing internally in order to strengthen the work being

done in a larger context. Within the theme of areas for growth emerged two sub-themes, under

which there are lists of specific work to explore.

> ***Create more welcoming and supportive environments.*** This sub-theme includes a

myriad of topics that came up in the narratives and does not restrict to just the classroom

environment, but extends to whole school environments as well as Montessori as a culture. Zora

sums up this sub-theme as an area for growth when she says, "If you don't feel welcome, then

why would you go? If you feel as though you're always constantly fighting, why would you

stay?" (Interview, July 9, 2016).

> *Bias baked into the image of Montessori.* It came up time and time again in these

narratives that there is a perception that Montessori is for the elite, and that Montessori in general

needs to work on it public relations to better communicate that the philosophy does, and can,

serve more than just white affluent students. When unpacking this, participants explained that it

seemed that often today's Montessori teachers and parents went to Montessori schools as

children themselves, and that this fact has not unfolded into having more Montessori teachers of

color or families of color in its ranks (Zora and Alice interviews), but instead has kept

Montessori very white.

> Along that same line, of the 4000 Montessori schools we have nationwide, 3500 of them

are private. One of the ways private schools attempt to deal with a lack of economic diversity, if

they do at all, is to provide scholarships. When scholarship families are introduced to a school

culture is often is where implicit bias in a school culture becomes exposed. Let's consider the following examples having to do with class. The culture that is created, often unconsciously, in a private Montessori school, is the culture of the majority of families, which happen to be those who can afford to send their child to private school. A culture that is affirming of privilege is one of many barriers that a poor family may have to surmount in order to have their child attend a Montessori school. This possibly bias culture as a barrier is in addition to the already present financial barrier and a possible red-tape barrier of applying for scholarship. There is also the barrier of enrollment. Debs (2016) research describes the often complicated systems to enroll in Montessori public schools, and I would argue that that list is similar and longer for private Montessori schools. Enrollment barriers may include applications only in English, access to a computer and the internet, complicated enrollment multi-step processes, sibling enrollment priority, and the ability to forecast your family's needs into the distant future in order to overcome a long wait-list (an impracticality when you may be concerned about securing housing for your family next month).

The rules, policies, standards, clothing, transportation, play-dates, lunches, and snacks also reflect the population of which the school serves, and that culture becomes what is thought of as "normal" even though it is a construction of the culture of the population. A poor family may feel alienated, unwelcomed, or not accepted in this culture and may not feel "normal" as a result of existing outside the constructed culture. Many poor families still jump these hurdles and find a way to enroll their children in a private Montessori, only to then have their children internalize these messages that they are not normal, or that they are "other", once they are enrolled. To further this struggle, the teachers often reflect the student population which they

serve, and may unknowingly perpetuate this culture in their classroom messaging - thus making the scholarship child feel further "othered".

In the school I work at I see this play out in many ways, but one illustrative example is simply what is in a child's lunch box. Colorful vegetables and fruit, likely organic, and whole grain goods, is what graces most lunch boxes at the small non-profit preschool that I work at - which serves a mostly affluent population. This food is a visual reminder of class, of access to transportation and funds to get to Whole foods or Trader Joe's. A plastic grocery bag with a Lunchable stands out, and sadly may be judged as a poor choice when compared to the lunch choices that are afforded when one does not lives in a food desert, and has ample transportation options to get to a grocery store. The teachers work hard to check their biases and support the child, and it is hard to measure the effects of lunch culture on a child's psyche, but I notice it, and wonder its impact. We hear similar versions to this story in the participants' narratives, but they are not limited to class examples. The stories refer also to teachers and students of color feeling unwelcome in the Montessori setting. Paul comments on Montessori having a perception of being for the elite when he said,

> Specifically with Montessori, Montessori has somehow built up an air of affluence or
>
> elite in the American society. I don't know the history enough to know how that occurred.
>
> It may have something to do with the way that it was brought to America. I think because
>
> of that, because it tends to target more affluent areas within our American society that, by
>
> consequence means that it will attract those who are in those societies, which tend to not
>
> be minorities statistically (Interview, July 9, 2016).

Alice considers the scholarship family's experience when she said,

I know the schools that my two older kids went to, they had one or two scholarship

families but it's really hard to hold onto those families because they feel out of place and I

don't blame them...I think they're like, what are we doing here? I think Montessori, there's

definitely a perception that it's for the elite.... I think it has to do with knowing about

Montessori and who went to a Montessori school when they were young probably so kind

of a cycle (Interview, July 8, 2016).

Zora walked me through being a teacher of color in a private Montessori school, and how

questions and comments from her white students, while innocent, wore on her, and created an

unwelcoming environment. She commented how at times it felt that to go to work she must wear

a mask,

I think it's just really difficult with Montessori. There is this perception about what

Montessori is and who it's for...when I worked at the private school, there weren't very

many other people that looked like me. I felt more alienated. It was harder for me to

relate to some of the staff even. I even had students come up to me like, "Why are your

lips so big and why is your hair ..." It's just like after a while, these are just children ... but

you know after a while it just wears on you…..When people talk about the weight of

having to put on a different face all the time and having to deal with little

micro-aggressions with their students or with their coworkers, I know my mother has a

lot of issues with that and one of the reasons why she wants to leave, so it's like if those

things aren't dealt with and even at my school, when my school started to transition from

being majority black to being a little bit more diverse even with the teaching force, those

kind of issues started to pop up (July 8, 2016).

When I asked Meanda why she thought the general Montessori teaching body was not more

diverse, she considered a lack of support for families and teachers of color in Montessori. She

also cited a potential lack of authenticity in understanding diversity within Montessori schools as

likely adding to this unwelcoming environment. Meanda said,

> We can recruit all day but if we're not supporting people of color, or they don't feel like
>
> they belong in a Montessori, then that's where the bigger issue lies, you know what I'm
>
> saying ...I think that's just the crucial part of it, is that we can get, for the most part, we
>
> can talk about Montessori all day and get the philosophy but if people aren't supported
>
> when they come into it then it's kind of a loss...I think that's going to be important going
>
> forward... is just making sure that- we can say all day that we want diversity but if you
>
> don't know how to celebrate diversity..., and then do it in an authentic way. You can't just
>
> say, well you know it's black history month so we're going to have old negro spirituals
>
> while people come in the classroom (Interview, July 9, 2016).

Meanda also discussed how streamlining, and getting Montessori recognized in college settings,

would make it more appealing to people of color to pursue Montessori teacher training. As it

stands at the time of this writing, there are only a handful of colleges where once can come out

with a degree that is also recognized by AMS or AMI, so many Montessori teachers originally

had a bachelor's degree, and then must go on for their Montessori credential which takes on

average one to three years to complete. Meanda said, " we need a pipeline through historically

black colleges and through our different communities to maybe even have a dual program of

here, you can get your Montessori certification and then you also can be a certified teacher"

(Interview, July 9, 2016).

Better public relations - clarify what is Montessori? There is an additional public relations issue that came up in these narratives and that is that that the general public doesn't necessarily know what Montessori is, and the meaning behind all of the materials and the method. Therefore parents are unsure if it will serve the needs of their family, and they are unwilling to take the risk. Zora shared an example of working in the non-Montessori public school with a family of color whose child was having a lot of behavioral and academic challenges. Zora, having experience in Montessori schools, used that experience to suggest to the family that this student might really thrive in a Montessori setting. She said,

> When I brought it up they were like, 'Oh, but isn't that the kind of school where they just let you do whatever you want, and they just focus on motor skills...My child needs to learn and my child, he can't be inside that kind of environment where he just does whatever he wanted'. ... many people may possibly be turned off by little things like that. 'Why are you only focusing on the motor skills when they're three? How come my niece that's in [inaudible 00:43:24] school, they know their whole alphabet and all the sounds, and my child that's in this [Montessori] program, they just know they're still working on cutting or pouring?' I think there's a big issue with education parents. (Interview, July 8, 2016).

To develop in this area, Montessori needs a concise and clear message that it can serve any child well. Being able to condense Montessori philosophy into an elevator pitch is going to be a challenge for this thoughtful and detailed philosophy. A method that was created long before soundbites and three minute youtube videos dominated our ways of learning about a subject. Also Montessori could work to align or highlight the Montessori principles to what

non-white non-affluent families are seeking. For example tracing the links of the philosophy to

CRP, or discussing the ways in which the philosophy empowers children, could be two avenues

to pursue. The concern in some communities of color that their child be "school ready" or

succeed at various testing is real and grounded. Montessori would be wise to show how the

method will meet these standards for children of color as well as for white children.

   Letting go of "purity" - shifting the debate away from "fidelity" and toward "integrity."

A popular debate within Montessori communities, centers around issues of fidelity.

Montessorians within a school will debate whose teaching practice is "more Montessori," AMI

has been known for decades to claim that AMS schools are only "Montessori -ish" - claiming

AMI closer fidelity to Dr. Montessori's original practices and teachings. Montessori schools

within a geographical region will compare and contrast each school in regards to who is "more"

Montessori, and Montessori conferences have spent many workshops trying to teach "real" or

"truer" Montessori. When one looks into the world of Montessori teacher training, the battle

gets ugly, and maybe rightfully so. I acknowledge the need for standards and there does have to

be thought put into what the common denominator is when claiming to "be" Montessori. My

concern is where and why the debate is focused on that specific set of coordinates? The

coordinates of authenticity and almost with a tone, I would argue, of who is most "pure." I

wonder if this focus contributes to creating unwelcoming spaces and limits Montessori's

expansion to working with more minority and poor students.

  My issue with the debate is who choose where to shine the fidelity spotlight? Because I

see different categories in need of being discussed when talking about fidelity in Montessori. I

think fidelity discussions should be focused on who is best meeting the child where they are, not

who best performs a lesson like Dr. Montessori did 100 years ago. The fidelity debate is often

focused on the materials and the lessons and tries to determine how close they are in practice in

today's classrooms to Dr. Montessori's original teachings. How one presents the bead chains, or

whether a teacher chooses to have print or D'Nealian sandpaper letters in the classroom are a few

examples of the focus of the debate. What a teacher puts in practical life, and if they include a

wash basin and pitcher from the 1900's for hand-washing work is fodder for how Montessori

you are as a teacher. I argue that this focus makes Montessori more exclusive, and allows for

fewer types of teaching and learning to ensue - and I sincerely don't think that was Montessori's

intent.

This type of focus on materials and specific rote ways of presenting a lesson, furthers

exclusivity and division. I would like to see the debate be "who is closer to her intent?" I would

like a rubric to determine how Montessori a teacher, classroom, school, or training center is

focused on approach, not content. If Montessorians focus on how we can better meet the child

where they are, if we bring in different materials to engage a student's particular type of learning

or interest, if we work to best draw out the deep well of knowledge that is within each child - that

is how we are true Montessorians. I wonder if Montessori educators focused on their intent and

approach, instead of on their lessons and materials, if some of the ways in which exclusion has

been baked into the practice may begin to dissolve. Let's turn to the narratives to see how these

educators see the idea of "purity" or "fidelity" restricting Montessori from better serving

minority children and poor children.

Zora struggled with her notion of Montessori and its potential for cultural relevance,

alongside the inflexible adherence to how some Montessori schools hold rigid to the initial

lessons. Zora said,

> there is an issue with there's this concept with fidelity, staying true to Maria Montessori
>
> said that we should do, and strict adherence to that, and the way that the world is, and the
>
> children that we have in our class, and being respectful of them and their culture that they
>
> come, and their home culture that they have. If they're coming from a family that's not
>
> Western, that's not European, I think there is an issue with that. Okay, well we want to do
>
> all this stuff with fidelity, but if we looked at grace and courtesy, it's like should we be
>
> addressing these students differently, is it wrong for us to ask them to look us in the eye
>
> to give us a handshake, is this handshake archaic? (Interview, July 8 2016).

I appreciate this monologue, as like me, I hear Zora's appreciation for the philosophy, yet I hear

her struggle with how many Montessori clasrooms carry out the philosophy today. I interpret her

thoughts as finding conflict in the fidelity argument with Montessori's ideas around respect. She

is referring to a lesson that Montessori writes of, and Zora witnessed in her classroom, where

children greet each other, and visiting adults, with a handshake. Many Montessori schools to this

day implement this practice within what Montessori called *Grace and Courtesy* lessons, and

students are expected to look people in the eye and shake their hand.

What I hear Zora saying in the quote, and what I would second, is that if Montessori were

alive today, and knowing her deep respect for children, she would likely not have children

continue this archaic practice, unless it was for whatever reason part of their family's culture.

She would find a more culturally relevant approach to meet the same goal. What is the

significance of the handshake lesson? I believe it is to give students the tools to greet adults,

which is still a valid skill to glean in culture today. However the content of the lesson should

have changed to reflect a child's home culture today, the community within which they live, any special needs they may experience, and other influential factors. I urge Montesorians to shift the fidelity question to be more focused on *how close are we to her intent of this lesson,* and away from *how close are we to using the exact same lesson that she taught over a century ago.*

Paul also wondered if the idea of fidelity is what is holding Montessori back from reaching more students of minority or poor backgrounds. The idea that Montessori philosophy needs to compromise or dilute its principles when brought to public school is a common concern in Montessori communities. The concerns are valid as the need to test, to meet common core standards, and work with in the traditional teacher-led curriculum challenges Montessori's foundation and require nuanced and skilled administrators to be able to work and meet the standards of both systems. That said, the shutting down of the very idea of going into public schools by many Montessorians is also common. This sort of inflexibility in the face of creating more Montessori public schools with fidelity touted as the reason why, needs to be challenged and picked apart. I advocate for infusing the discussion with a bit more oxygen and look for places of compromise while staying true to its integrity, as the 500 public Montessori schools have worked to accomplish. If you care about all children receiving quality education regardless of circumstance, and you believe in the Montessori philosophy, we must ask, what are the ways the philosophy stand solid on its foundation and not loose its integrity, yet be flexible enough that it can be implemented into the public school setting and reach a larger population? Paul says, "Whatever that conversation needs to be. I think if a level of flexibility is brought within Montessori, so it's implementation can still occur in a public school culture that is very big on results, then I think a lot of these challenges [discussing access to minority and poor students]

will be taken away" (Interview, July 9, 2016).

The suggestion is that Montessori as a field begins the work to become more welcoming to all communities. In order to do this work Montessori needs to move forward on many fronts, and it can begin with the sub-themes that arose from this data. Montessori needs to show that it is an education system that works well with more than just white affluent families, it needs to work hard to recruit and support poor and minority families, it needs to unpack bias in the schools, classrooms, and teaching practices, and it needs to revisit debates about fidelity and shift the focus to the integrity of Montessori. This unpacking of Montessori culture may force a hand at removing, what some may consider, a polite mask for discrimination that some Montessorians have worn for decades.

Additional Teacher Training & Resources. I found an additional area for growth in that Montessori teacher training centers need to enhance their programming to include issues relevant to today. What I found in the transcripts is evidence of a gap between practice and need on the part of teachers. This gap seems to call for developing Montessori teacher certification programs to include focused trainings on parent engagement, navigating testing in public schools, trauma training, mental health support, and as we have already explored, anti-bias training. These trainings would be even more effective implemented within the framework of the Montessori philosophy than in a traditional school setting. Adjacent to this idea of developing the teacher training program, is the idea of having some of these resources in house for the families.

Paul talked about what he observed in his school as a need for Montessorians to have better knowledge on how to approach the demands of testing in public school settings. He said,

Testing is a big one. I think that can be solved, I think it just requires a level of flexibility. Maybe that's the big thing that Montessori could work on is a level of flexibility within its implementation. It's tricky though, because in order to allow Montessori to work within the public sector, and I should say more specifically within public schools, it would require other ways of dealing with standardized tests. It would require other ways of providing education to parents because both of those issues in many ways can undo what happens in a Montessori classroom even if it's implemented the way it should be (Interview, July 9, 2016).

Meanda also spoke to this frustration. She talked about the philosophy's commitment to the respect of the child, and how she feels a difficulty in carrying out this respect within the parameters of public schools. She said,

I think it's really hard to do that, especially in a public school, to prepare an environment for every single child because you have common core standards, and you have these levels that you do have to achieve because achievement is so important nonetheless being in a Montessori school. For me, what's important about being in a Montessori school is the fact that children are supposed to be respected, right? (Interview, July 9, 2016).

Alice articulated her school's needs for additional trauma training, and perhaps even onsite counseling services. She said,

Figure out the mental health piece. Figure out how to get families to that because we just had two very, very tough kids and we just struggled with it all year. I think one thing is to have it at school. I think what you have to say is, [child's

name] getting picked up at three so your appointment's at two. You come at two

and the appointment will be over at three and then you can bring them home

(Interview, July 8, 2016).

Alice also talked about her staff needed additional training on how to work with parents.

She talked about working with parents this past year to suggest earlier bedtimes,

For this year our main strategy was to shorten kids days on the sort of like, if they

can be successful for two hours a day for a month we'd go to three. Maybe the piece

of being successful for two hours is you write down what time they went to bed

every night because that is a huge piece of age group four. You know you've got

enough focus and so kind of working together (Interview, July 8, 2016).

There are some teacher training centers that are beginning to perhaps address some of the

gap. Zora spoke of her current AMI teacher training,

….the interesting thing about this training, so it's through Montessori in the public

sector, and they're trying to create wrap around courses that address teaching inside,

they call it urban, teaching in an urban school or whatever, or teaching in public

schools, or working with families that come from dual language or bilingual

households, and working with children that have trauma (Interview, July 8, 2016).

Therefore there are missing segments in the Montessori teacher training programs. As we

reviewed in the section about creating more welcoming environments, Montessori teacher

training centers must add an anti-bias piece to their curriculum in support of today's

teachers. Furthermore additional training in trauma, how to engage parents, how to work

with testing, and considering bringing services in house - are all additional ways

Montessori could grow and develop to better serve under resourced populations.

Future Research & Conclusion

I have scratched the surface of the potential of Montessori serving students of color and children in poverty with this research. There is such a small collection of literature on the overlap and potential of Montessori and CRP. Strengthening this connection would empower Montessori educators to infuse their practice with more specific and effective teaching to best meet each child where they are in culturally relevant ways. Future research along these lines will also aid CRP advocates to consider Montessori as an established blueprint for culturally relevant practices to be easily established.

Furthermore, increasing quantitative research around student achievement and Montessori will confirm that the pursuit of more Montessori schools is a sound objective. Finally, quantitative and qualitative research from outside the Montessori community to explore the potential, as well as research from within the community that works to explore areas for growth - will strengthen the integrity of Montessori education.

In conclusion, my research is guided by two hopes, one to illustrate the great potential of Montessori to support underserved populations, and two to encourage Montessori to grow and change to best serve the children today. We heard from Montessori educators who opened schools for impoverished populations, taught using

culturally relevant curriculums, found courage to teach in predominantly white schools as

an African American teachers, worked to develop anti-bias curriculums, and more. These

stories illustrated the potential in this philosophy. In issues of equity in education,

Montessori needs to be considered as a strategy.

A second hope of my research is to shed light on Montessori practices that stall its

own growth and development in its service to poor and minority students. Montessorians

need to correct these imbalances and do our part to erode the educational debt that

Landson Billings called our attention to now ten years ago (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Whether that work is to become more welcoming in our schools, to develop Montessori

anti-bias teacher training components, to work to increase resources and training for our

educators, to help schools analyze enrollment practices, to counter narratives that

Montessori is only for the elite, to advocating to open a public Montessori school - the

message is that Montessorians have work to do and need to be called into action. We

must revisit Dr. Montessori's words and intentions, we must invigorate our practices with

the integrity the philosophy deserves by meeting any, and every child, exactly at the

coordinates where he or she is.

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