Equity-Based Assessment Practices in Montessori: Data Informed Collaborations

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Abstract

How are Montessori educators working in higher education implementing equity-based assessment practices? Current perspectives and an examination of broad theoretical literature led the researchers to propose that Montessori as a learner-centered educational practice and human development theory can be an effective method for implementing equity-based assessment practice (EBAP). Survey data and a Montessori teacher educator inquiry group provided insight into the experience and interest in EBAP for Montessori adult learners and confirmed the effectiveness of building trust, using transparent expectations, learning pacing, learning participation and choice. We concluded that EBAP can be used effectively in Montessori adult education so that teachers experience the humanistic/liberatory potential when authentic assessment contributes to the personal learning journey in a communal context.

The Need and Objective

Need to overcome disparity between Montessori pedagogy applied to children and how adult learners experience teacher education. Montessori as a learner-centered educational practice and human development theory can be an effective method for implementing equity-based assessment practice (EBAP) with adult learners. Sometimes referred to as "ungrading," EBAP:

- utilizes transparent expectations
- learner pacing, participation and choice

Our working understanding of EBAP includes mutually reinforcing pillars = accurate + bias-resistant + motivational (Feldman, 2018 p. 65).

EBAP is dynamic and emerging work that has not been widely examined, piloted or integrated into systems and institutions of adult learning that promotes a "Radical Hope" (Gannon, 2020) that we can support each and all learners.

This investigation invites reflection on equity-based assessment practices inspired by research that conventional grading negatively impacts students' interest in learning and curiosity (Feldman, 2018, 2019; Bray & Ward, 2023), student preference for challenging tasks (Kohn, 2012), the teacher's relationship with students (Butler, 1987) and student learning from mistakes (Denervaud et. al., 2020; Blum, 2020a; Blum, 2020b).

Key Literature

Within the context of university educational structure, some of the strategies deemed successful in implementing EBAP are:

- coaching without judgment (Damore & Rieckhoff, 2021)
- aligning language with performance (Sackstein, 2020)
- providing feedback or narrative evaluations without grades (Butler, 1987)
- contract grading and syllabus co-construction (Katopodis & Davidson, 2020)
- Do-Review-Redo process and single point rubrics (Riesbeck, 2020), and
- Student self-assessment and portfolios (Blum, 2020b), including the nature of assignments such as long-term assignments, more collaborative work, more choice, and the use of authentic demonstration.

Research Questions

>What, if any, implementation of equity-based assessment practice (EBAP) with adult learners is occurring in Montessori education?

>Is there a shared understanding among Montessori teacher educators of what equity-based assessment practice (EBAP) is and how it is utilized with adult learners?

Participants

11 Montessori Teacher Education Faculty working in Higher Ed Settings
14 Montessori Teacher Ed Faculty working in Higher Ed Settings (recruited separately)

Methodology

Survey:
A seven question survey was deployed to Montessori teacher educators through the formal and informal Montessori networks. Data were collected January and February 2023.

The survey was completed anonymously, this is at the cost of demographic data but for the uninhibited honesty. Per our IRB proposal, no tracking or collecting of emails, IPs, etc.

Questions queried respondents' experience with EBAP as a student, as a K-12 teacher and as an instructor of adult learners and included identifying benefits and challenges.

Inquiry Group:
We met on 4 occasions 7/20, 9/21, 11/2, 1/11
Prompts used were strategies from the survey that data indicated had been tried, selections from *Ungrading* (Bloom, 2020) and *Radical Hope* (Gannon, 2020).

A phenomenological inductive approach of systematic analysis of concepts and words was used in responses to survey and in dialogue in inquiry groups to determine patterns and build a landscape of practice.

Results

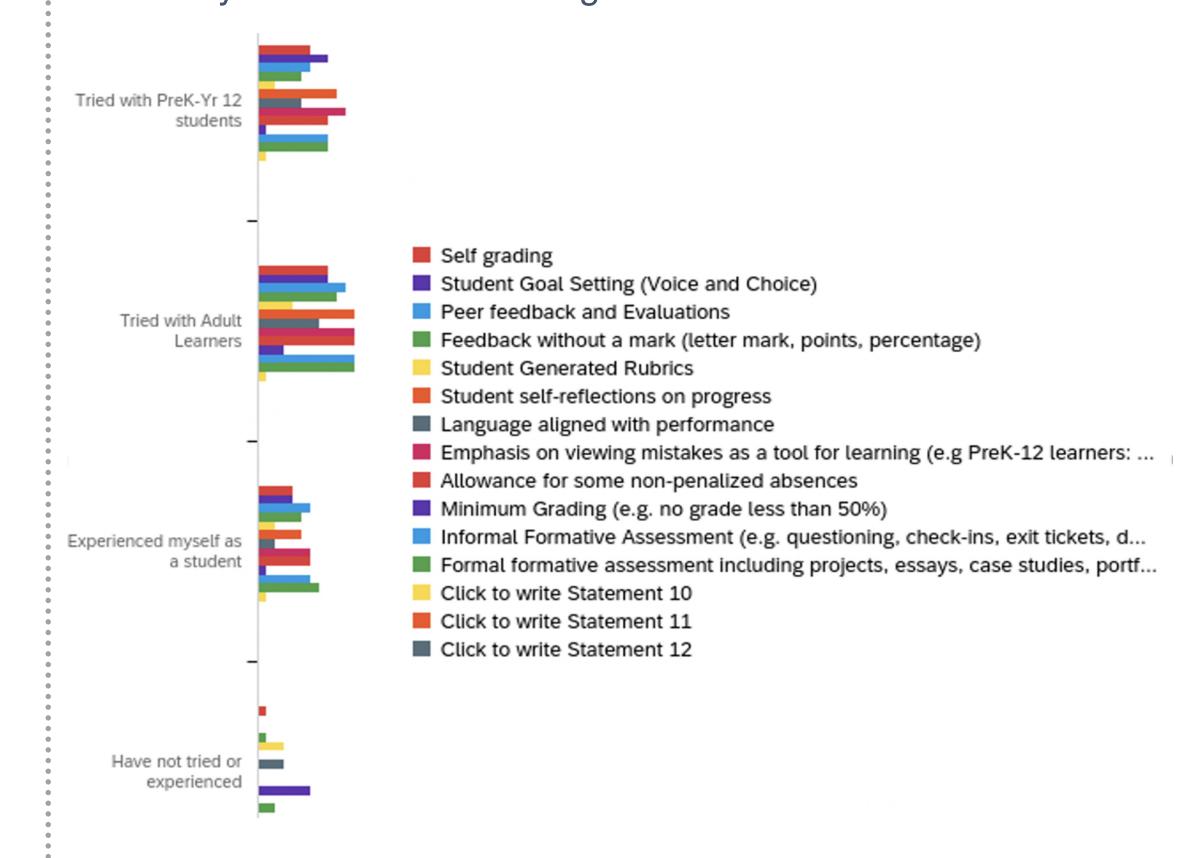**EBA Strategies tried with Adult Learners:**

- Peer reviews
- Projects with choice
- Collaboration on Assignments
- Cumulative Assignments
- Action Research
- Guided goal setting
- Opportunities for self-reflection
- Regular opportunities for Individual and small group meetings
- Portfolios
- Adult Learner led discussion groups
- Contracts

Recommended practices by Inquiry Group:

- Orientation to EBA extending beyond one session
- Building Trust and Community
- Regular Conferencing (whole person)
- Transparency – purpose of each lesson
- Offer choices to meet desired outcomes.

Results (continued)

Survey Adult Learner Strategies:

Results - Benefits and Challenges

Benefits:

- Meaning-making provided by authentic cumulative assignments and projects
- Safe space
- Joy in learning
- Agency provided by assessment choice and peer evaluation Ownership provided by goal setting and self-assessment
- Get away from we vs. them mentality
- Develops trust
- Leads to community building

Challenges:

- Necessity of Orientation
- Differentiating instruction – some need more scaffolding than others
- Supporting students who tend to procrastinate
- Adult learners at times struggle with self-reflection
- It takes more time to give extensive feedback and assess resubmissions
- Perception by colleagues – unfairness – some getting off 'lightly'
- Providing choice in Montessori methods courses (much easier in Child Development, observation, philosophy)

Conclusions and Implications

- Montessori human development theory, and subsequent pedagogy has promoted the agency of the child for over a century. In teacher education, we need to focus on consonance of our practices with our pedagogy.
- Our exploratory study revealed that teacher educators are motivated to have their candidates experience the pedagogy they are going to teach and want guidance in promoting the agency and transformation of the teacher where they move beyond the technical to "flow" with deeper understanding.
- Research has shown a humanistic/liberatory, compassionate pedagogy can create a safe space through responsive teaching that nurtures risk taking leading to excellence.
- Equity based assessment is a fundamental tool in building this safe space and pathway to excellence.

Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

While this survey has been informed by the literature and current best-practices in equity-based assessment practice (EBAP) it has not been vetted as a reliable or valid instrument.

- This initial step with IHE serves the purpose of a landscape analysis to "locate" Montessori teacher educational practice in the context of education more broadly.
- Next step, already underway, is to survey community-based teacher education programs.
- Further research could capture the voices of classroom teachers across the career continuum.
- Upon completion of this field building survey, a landscape analysis will be available to inform a second study that includes preservice and in-service practitioners.

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