

# Montessori as Metonymy

## How Montessori Early Childhood Teachers Approach Race in the Classroom

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### INTRODUCTION

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

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite research dating from 1947 through the present day that demonstrates **very young children possess and enact racial bias** (Aboud, 1988; Beaubien & Williams 2013; Clark & Clark, 1947; Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2008; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), **most teachers and parents do not address the topic of race with young children in more than a superficial way** (Aboud, 1988; Katz, 2003; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Some parents and teachers do not discuss race at all or employ a **colorblind** approach, ignoring the personal and cultural capital that is important to the developing identity (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Vittrup, 2016b). While schools are a setting that could be conducive to conversations about race, evidence suggests these conversations between adults and young children do not often occur, especially in preschools. What parents and teachers could be overlooking is **that conversations around racial and ethnic differences are happening between children**. Beaubien and Williams (2013) noted: [for young children] racial conversations occur every day in the preschool classroom. Often teachers ignore the conversation or take a surface almost passive way around the dialogue, **losing the opportunity** to open and create the discussion of race in a comfortable, safe, learning space (p. 82).

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

### Research Questions

How do Montessori teachers react to and address race talk and/or bias with children, and what do Montessori teachers present or teach to children regarding race and/or racial bias?

1. How do Montessori ECE teachers talk about race and racial bias with young children?
2. How do Montessori ECE teachers teach about race and racial bias?
3. If Montessori ECE teachers do not teach and/or talk directly with children about race and racial bias, what are some ways that race and racial bias are addressed in the classroom?
4. What instruction and guidance from their teacher education program did Montessori ECE teachers receive in discussing and addressing race and racial bias?

### METHODOLOGY

#### Participants

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

#### Research Method and Design

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

An **infographic** was created from the initial survey coding to inform interview participants of emerging themes prior to the data-prompted interview. This tool was provided to assist the interviewees in reactivating their survey responses and in eliciting more in-depth answers to interview questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally. The transcriptions were approved first by the researcher and then the interviewees. The transcribed interviews were then coded in an open coding process, utilizing the researcher's interview notes to add context when necessary. **Analytic coding** was the next step in this process and required in-depth reading of and reflection on the interview transcripts and initial coding. The code book was provided to the independent analyst, along with the transcripts of the interviews. Intercoder reliability for the interviews was determined to be approximately 90%. After this more focused coding was completed, general themes were determined.

### RESULTS

#### Themes from Surveys

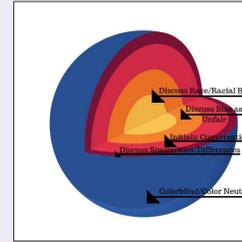
- Theme 1: Children are not biased.**
- Theme 2: Indirect or implicit teaching around race inherent in Montessori.**
- Theme 3: Comfortable talking to children about race.**
- Theme 4: Education about race and racial bias is implicit in Montessori training, but not explicit**

#### Overall Theme from Surveys

The central theme from respondents was that Montessori teachings and training **implicitly** prepared them to discuss race and racial bias if the topics arose in their environments. Most equated teaching or talking about race or racial bias with teaching about diversity, respect, peace, peace education, culture, or similarities between peoples. While a few participants did not agree that diversity, respect, and peace equated to teaching or talking about race, and understood the broader themes and teachings in Montessori as supporting their work in talking or teaching about race and racial bias, they were in a small minority.

#### Themes from Interviews

- Theme One: Race Stories.**
- Theme Two: Difficulty in Talking to Parents about race.**
- Theme Three: Finding Positive Ways of Presenting Race/Bias.**
- Theme Four: Training Outside of Montessori.**



Representation of overall themes on race and bias from survey respondents.



The levels represented not only the perceived depth of participants' teaching and talking about race in the environment, but the perceptions of the interviewee's personal comfort and depth in excavating their racial identity

#### Overall Theme from Interviews

A major theme of the interviews was that although interviewees indicated that Montessori training implicitly prepared them to address race and bias, they still felt the need to do work outside of their Montessori training to adequately prepare to discuss issues of race with children. Also, although most participants did not feel young children needed explicit presentations around race or bias, racial episodes were happening to and around children in the schools.

### DISCUSSION

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

#### Barriers to Race Talk

- Montessori as Metonymy
- Niceness, Whiteness and Teacher Education
  - Early Childhood
- Montessori Training
  - In-group bias
  - Montessori Teachers and Paradox
  - Bias and the Absorbent Mind
  - Supplemental Lessons and Fidelity to Training
  - "Simple language" and nomenclature
  - Racism and Race Stories

### IMPLICATIONS

Participants in this study were largely without direction from their training regarding addressing race and racial bias. Nash and Miller (2015) maintained that key to an early childhood teacher educator's work is the recognition that uninterrupted whiteness will continue to cause disproportionalities in education (p. 201). The Montessori community must recognize the saliency of race education and provide direction to Montessori teachers.

- Teachers may need to educate themselves extensively on children and race, which is primarily within their control. A means of access might be to consider their own identity and their teacher identity within the context of culture and race, and seek out leaders in the field.

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

### FUTURE WORK

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

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

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### CONTACT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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