Intersections between Montessori Practices and Culturally-Based Curriculum for African-American Students

AMS Research Committee White Paper
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One of the goals of AMS is to disseminate research relevant to Montessori education. The AMS Research Committee is publishing this white paper to present a conceptual model that illustrates similarities between Montessori practices and instructional needs of African American children.

Introduction

Dr. Maria Montessori, Italian physician and later educational visionary, developed teaching and learning strategies that largely contrasted the behaviorist view of education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As opposed to seeing the student as an “empty receptacle” waiting to be filled with facts and information by the teacher, Dr. Montessori viewed children as active and self-directed participants in constructing knowledge of the world around them (Lillard, 2005; Montessori, 2006). This constructivist approach is at the core of Montessori methods in developing cognition in early childhood learners (Loeffler, 1992).

Over the past few decades, Montessori instruction has increasingly been seen as a viable alternative to the behaviorist approach to teaching and learning. Based on its programmatic success, Montessori schools have extended beyond the private sector and into the public domain (Dohrmann et al., 2007). Despite this expansion, these programs are still perceived as elitist given that Montessori schools have been traditionally private institutions requiring tuition. Thus, the accessibility of such education can be limited to families in lower income brackets (Peshkin, 2000). Additionally, as Montessori curriculum is often consigned to its own schools, there tends to be a partial understanding as to what exactly is Montessorian educational theory and practice (Benham, 2010; Zarybnisky, 2010).

The context

Scholars have long argued that in our urban public schools there exists the ever-increasing epidemic of academic failure and dropout among African American students (Bennett & Fraser, 2000; Blanchett, 2006; Fordham, 2001; Hale & Bailey, 2001; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003). Academic underachievement for these youth has been associated with teachers’ overreliance on
direct instruction, socially and culturally irrelevant curriculum, excessive classroom discipline, as well as a lack of student self-discipline. Research literature also associates these students’ high educational hurdles with their out of school lives—e.g., the disintegration of the traditional family unit, community fragmentation, poverty, gang violence, and scarce community resources (youth organizations, athletic groups, violence prevention programs) (Fleming, Barner, Hudson & Rosignon-Carmouche, 2000; MacLeod, 1995; Wilson, 1992).

In school settings where direct instructional teaching methods are vigorously employed, how might African American students benefit from Montessori instruction? Equally, in what ways can such pedagogy extend beyond the classroom and into the communities of these youngsters? The answers to this query may be found in observing intersections between Montessori educational theory and culturally-based teaching practices best suited for African American students. These practices have been documented in over twenty years of educational research literature. The following is a brief discussion of these intersections.

**Intersections**

As existing studies report, the learner-centered, socially-mediated setting that Montessori practices yield has positive learning outcomes for students who are not thriving in traditional school environments (Dohrmann, et al. 2007; Harris, 2007; Lillard, 2005; Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). In noting contemporary research literature on African American students, we find that “factory model” school settings are not conducive to their academic success as these spaces are frequently devoid of curriculum that enables children to learn through exploration, intuition and emotion (Hall, 2006; Kunjufu, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noguera, 2003).

Scholars from disciplines of education, psychology and sociology contend that African American students require a range of instructional methods in order to be academically successful. These methods include being exposed to positive self-images (Hale-Benson, 1986; Kunjufu, 1995; Perry et al., 2003; Porter, 1998); strong self-esteem building activities (Tatum, 1997); culturally and social responsive curriculum (Perry et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994); use of the four learning modalities (Kunjufu, 2005); freedom and flexibility in the classroom (Hall, 2006; Majors & Billson, 1992); cooperative learning environments (Kunjufu, 2005); critical thinking instruction (Hall, 2006; Kunjufu 2005; Ladson-Billings); responsibility for actions and decisions (Fashola, 2005; Noguera, 2003); building strong relationships with school and community (Hopkins, 1997); personal responsibility and autonomy (Wright, 2011).

The multiple approaches to teaching African American students listed above are, in many ways, obvious and direct reflections of Montessorian methods. There exists multiple in and out of school connections between Montessorian pedagogy and the social and educational needs of Black children (as stated above). The application of phonemic awareness in Montessorian instruction, for example, via interactive games is represented in the pedagogical need for “the four learning modalities” in Black student instruction. Similarly, Montessorian ideals on auto-education correspond with African American students being engaged in a classroom setting that promotes “flexibility, creativity and inner-discipline.”
From an out of school perspective, ideals of peace and community education, as well as being accountable for others is analogous to the necessity to assist African American students in being responsible for their “actions and decisions,” as well as “building strong relationships with school and community.” Likewise, comparisons can also be observed between Maria Montessori’s intention of having children become economically self-sufficient with the above-mentioned claim that Black students progress towards “personal responsibility and autonomy.”

**Further inquiry**

This white paper presented a cursory review of literature and obvious links between Montessori practices and the educational needs of African American learners. This work can further be expanded on by employing longitudinal studies that assess the outcomes of Montessorian pedagogy on African American students, who are coming from schools that adopt behaviorist principles and teacher/text driven instruction—the same schools where we find a majority of these youth struggling academically and socially.

As part of future educational inquiry, researchers should also take note of diversity issues within Montessori curriculum. For instance, in what ways can traditional Montessori classrooms incorporate “positive self-images” and “culturally responsive curriculum” for Black students and other ethnic minorities? Indeed, further studies have the potential to not only present us with a deeper understanding of the learning styles of Black students, but also concrete and specific ways Montessori practices can lead to their long-term academic and social success.

**References**


Hale-Benson, J. E. (1986). *Black children: Their roots, culture, and learning styles*. Baltimore,
Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.


