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Finding roots in the Montessori social studies curriculum

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Finding Roots in the Montessori Social Studies Curriculum

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Abstract

This action research aimed to determine if an equity audit of the Montessori social studies curriculum and learning about the researcher's culture impacted professional self-efficacy and resilience. This six-week intervention and study was a self-study through daily regimented activities. Three weeks were used to learn more about the researcher's own culture and history. Three additional weeks were dedicated to the equity audit process, where the researcher revised original lessons or created new, culturally sustaining lessons to augment the curriculum. The data collected was completed daily using four tools: an attitude scale, a guided questionnaire, a reflective journal, and finally during the three-week audit period, a curriculum audit checklist. The data suggested strong levels of self-efficacy and resilience across the intervention, though resilience wavered and lowered throughout due to its taxing nature. Additional supports and research can better support educators of color prepare for altering and implementing a culturally sustaining and anti-bias, antiracist Montessori social studies curriculum.

Keywords: resilience, Montessori, culturally sustaining, antibias antiracism

Land Acknowledgment

This thesis was largely crafted, written, and completed in Seattle, Washington. Seattle is home to the Coast Salish People, including but not limited to the Duwamish (past and present). Many nations reside and host a rich history here. In my efforts to understand my own history and people, it was important for me to recognize these traditional and unceded lands in the state of Washington. I wished to honor the land and the people who came before me as a simple gesture of resisting the erasure of Indigenous traditions, culture, and histories.

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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my project coach. Without her thoughtful, intentional feedback and patience throughout this process, this endeavor would not have been possible. Next, I need to extend a special thanks to my fiancé who listened to my thoughts, read my thesis, helped me refine my strategies, and was the most supportive partner for a year while also working on his MBA. Our household was busy and yet he always found time to let me verbally process my action research. Lastly, I extend my appreciation and sincerest thanks to my St. Kate's AM2 cohort. A year's worth of group texts, laughter, and informal peer support got us through this! Thank you all for making this a meaningful experience and affirming this work is necessary.

When I entered the room for my first day of Montessori training, I looked around the room carefully. There was one man, and the rest were women. I wasn't surprised by the number of women in the room as I had experience seeing the field of education with few men, especially for alternative education options such as Montessori. After introducing ourselves to the class, I took another long look across the cohort and noticed varying ages and stages of life or education levels. Yet only two were people of color – me and another young woman and we were both Latina. She was Mexican American, and I Puerto Rican. We bonded quickly over the generational shifts she and I made as first-generation college graduates. My training center was in a predominantly white, conservative city; people of the Global Majority were few and far between. However, she and I both needed more validation of our identities, as Latinas, in this training process and the curriculum. We also knew we needed to be ultra-responsive to students of color because that's what we needed when we were younger.

The Montessori teacher training process includes foundational work to transform the pre-service educator into one who always commits to self-analysis before engaging in any physical changes in a classroom or personal intellectual changes. My Montessori training included this across both years of my elementary training but was focused more so in the first summer-intensive session. As I learned about Dr. Montessori's philosophy and pedagogy, I was tasked with answering reflective questions and writing about myself in the role of the adult as part of the prepared environment. Some of the fundamental tenets of the adult in a Montessori classroom are that of an evaluator, an experimenter, and a supporter. My first two years as a Montessori teacher were in a public charter school in the South. Most of my students were Latino/a, like me. I worked tirelessly to ensure their lived experiences were affirmed – and their families sincerely appreciated my approach, as it was not anything they'd experienced before,

having only had white teachers in the past. I embodied each of those fundamental tenets because I realized that these students saw me as a role model; they finally had a teacher who understood them. My personal and professional work since then has led me to where I stand today, asking questions like what does a *continual* teacher transformation process look like? How do teachers of the Global Majority, like me, examine self-efficacy and resiliency in this field when the curriculum or the school policies don't protect and celebrate us?

As this action research is rooted in equity and inclusion, I must present my positionality and identity to understand the perspective from which this research was viewed. I am a Puerto Rican cisgender woman who is also a first-generation college graduate. The intersectionality between these parts of my identity marks the lived experience, balancing privilege and systemic oppression as I have navigated my career as a Montessori educator and equity researcher.

In my first few years as a Montessori educator, I felt I had to stick to each of the lessons the way they were presented to me — for authenticity's sake — and create additional safeguards to engage students. I failed to see beyond the *direct* and *indirect aims* of original lessons by not critically examining how my students of color could engage with the curriculum in a way that was meaningful to them. I was too wrapped up in *doing it right* rather than doing it right *by them*. I recognized early into my career how there were some missing histories or lessons that could have been more inclusive. Still, I attributed those gaps to a curriculum initially written over a hundred years ago. I thought I had to do something extra to fit the students. Each year, I committed myself to understand equity work and my impact. This project is a culmination of that near-decade's work.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) as a guiding marker for change.

The pedagogy, coupled with antibias, and anti-racist principles, provided two interconnecting pathways for the research to unfold. In 2012, Django Paris was inspired to understand what it meant to be culturally responsive and relevant. Paris (2012) offered a new take on Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) pivotal work in culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). Paris argued that CRP was the foundation from which to start but that "it is quite possible to be relevant to something or responsive to it without ensuring its continuing presence" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). It is because of this that Paris (2012) offered the term culturally *sustaining* pedagogy – a way to "perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 95). More specifically, Paris (2012) believed:

> We must ask ourselves if the research and practice being produced under the umbrella of cultural relevance and responsiveness is, indeed, ensuring maintenance of the languages and cultures of African American, Latina/o, Indigenous American, Asian American, Pacific Islander American, and other longstanding and newcomer communities in our classrooms (p. 94).

Paris' distinction in including the above communities became an explicit part of CSP; calling out African American, Latina/o, Indigenous American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander American communities was an essential part of this action research project, mainly because I am someone of the Global Majority. Two years later, H. Samy Alim joined Paris in promoting the concept of CSP through the format of a "loving critique" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 85). The authors contended that CSP was an answer to education and scholarship's long and jaded history with power and positionality. Paris and Alim (2014) iterated that "we can no longer assume that the White, middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills and ways of being that were considered the sole gatekeepers to the opportunity structure in the past will remain so as our

society changes" (p. 89). Power, positionality, and opportunity change with time, and Paris and Alim were mindful of these pieces through their work.

The work to continually build on the predecessors of CRP and other asset-based pedagogy continued for multiple years as CSP found its critical lens and framework footing. The framework then included a wealth of departures from its prior pedagogical theorists, including naming and rejecting "white settler capitalism" and "ideologies of white supremacy" (Paris & Alim, 2017; Alim et al., 2020). Alim et al. indicated that schools were oppressive and homogeneous spaces for communities of color, yet the youth of these communities tended to be fluid in their ability to flex their identity, whether they were with friends and family or in more formal settings such as school environments (Alim et al., 2020). Alim et al. (2020) urged the reader to consider a shift in thinking, from the colonizer to the colonized, and ponder what teaching practices might look like if the lessons had been informed, developed, and refined by students of color themselves.

CSP principles also retain antibias, anti-racist (ABAR) principles, although it is not disseminated as such. There was only one mention of the term *anti-racist*, wherein the authors stated that "CSP is necessarily and fundamentally a critical, anti-racist, anti-colonial framework that rejects the white settler capitalist gaze and the kindred cisheteropatriarchal, English-monolingual, ableist, classist, xenophobic and other hegemonic gazes" (Alim et al., 2020, p. 262). While the specification of the term *anti-racist* was mentioned once, the intentionality was clear.

This action research uses the culturally sustaining theory and antibias, anti-racist frameworks. The two joined theoretical frameworks have provided me, as a researcher and participant, with a clear scope of work to examine cultural understanding, historical significance,

and the presence of communities of color within the Montessori social studies curriculum. These frameworks allow for critical analysis and deep intellectual contextualization to include communities of color.

Literature Review

The purpose of this action research project is to explore the continual teacher transformation process and examine self-efficacy and resiliency through a curriculum audit intervention. This section reviews the scholarly work previously completed in understanding and sustaining culture. This section will be organized under the headings: understanding oppressive systems and histories; the importance of identity and race work; emerging themes in Montessori; the importance of social justice in Montessori elementary classrooms; and ethnic studies and similar programs.

Understanding Oppressive Systems and Histories

America's history has been rife with institutional and systemic oppression. Since its emergence as a fledgling country, America has been a host of severe historical traumas for people of color. The chronic and continued oppressions woven into norms were baked deeply into society through laws and other forms of punitive measures. America was created on stolen land by Europeans who came to this place to start anew. An example of these land losses can be seen in what is effectively called "Land-Grab Universities," where 11 million acres of land were taken to create fifty-two universities through the Morrill Act of 1862; it was one example of many that would ultimately displace tribal nations with the claim of broadening access to higher education (Akee, 2021). Even earlier, in 1619, the country had something else that pointed to the next stage of institutional oppression: the first cargo ships carrying enslaved Africans arrived at Virginia's shores (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). The original Constitution cited slavery in

three separate articles, noting that enslaved people were nothing more than "three-fifths a person" and permitting the sale or trade of enslaved (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016).

In the years that followed, several extremely harmful political movements based on racially charged beliefs rose across North America. These movements include segregation and Jim Crow laws to the creation of boarding schools for Indigenous people. The tales became the same: complete separation or assimilation with no middle ground. The last century held tightly onto civilian upheaval and activism and has questioned the power hierarchy that exists – why decisions have been made on behalf of people of color, what reasons there were for such choices, who benefited, and refused nothing less than recognition and reparations deserved (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2019). Dunbar-Ortiz (2019) chronicled the true history of Indigenous people in America and their path toward activism, often citing the oppressive nature of the laws in place at the time as a reminder that their histories had been complex and their narratives stolen. However, Dunbar-Ortiz (2019) noted that "Native people will persist in protecting their communities, their lands, their water, their sacred sites, and the wider world from the risks. Knowing how to be in that future world is your challenge" (p. 228). Dunbar-Ortiz's confidence in the Native and Indigenous communities reflects the condition that America has been developing – many white allies and people of color wish to seek reparations and revitalization for communities that have suffered for far too long.

The Importance of Identity & Race Work

All teachers have prepared for a future of working with children by entering a teacher education program. The coursework and instructors inevitably prioritized curriculum design and child development to round out the pre-service teacher's ability to teach content that would be appropriate to every student in the classroom. Courses such as Education Psychology, Knapp

(2005) found, must take the time to reflect on who the teacher was against whom they would serve. The identity of the pre-service teacher has been a starting point for teachers to begin the work of recognizing diversity in the classroom (Knapp, 2005). Knapp (2005) described American teachers as "overwhelmingly European American, middle-class, English-speaking, and female" (p. 202); Lowenstein's (2009) findings from the late 1990s found similar numbers and demographics. These analyses of the teaching workforce are still accurate over fifteen years later. According to a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study, over 79% of public-school teachers were white in the 2017-18 academic year (NCES, 2020). It should be noted that not all teacher education programs, nor their pre-service teachers, should be lumped into a category of deficit learners but rather as a group that benefits from understanding complex identities, cultures, and traditions, especially when teaching has been traditionally set in privilege (Lowenstein, 2009; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017).

Students have filled classrooms with unique identities, and some have required targeted support or strategies for success. Success is not necessarily marked by academic progress but could have other non-quantitative indicators such as motivation, behavior, student engagement, and family involvement (Knapp, 2005; Lin et al., 2008). These would require the teacher to think critically about identities, including their own, especially when students often "move between two worlds – their home culture and the mainstream" (Berriz, 2014, p. 198). Otherwise, bias and prejudice could manifest in the classroom (Christensen, 2018). Lin et al. (2008) stressed that home visits, as an example, allow the teacher to take in student home culture when considering what success looks like for each student. The social, emotional, and academic needs of students differ greatly, and assumptions about cultures bar teachers from providing quality instruction without seeing and interacting with the student's home life (Lin et al., 2008). Lowenstein (2009)

offered that the inclusion of cultural elements and leaning on Ladson-Billings' theory of culturally responsive teaching, was a way to foster cultural integrity and as a way to bridge the cultures of home life and school environments. While Lowenstein's work angles toward multicultural education for educators and Lin et al.'s work focuses on antibias education, these researchers agree that building teachers' cultural competence for the success of Global Majority students is imperative.

Christensen (2018), a Montessori researcher, reported that the social construction of identity and emotional labor added uncertainty to teachers' work. Nevertheless, bringing race and identity work to the forefront through journaling or other means was a simple reflective tool for "confronting racial bias and white-supremacist thinking present in oneself and society at large" (Christensen, 2018, p. 36), something that was also echoed in Lin et al. (2008) for traditional pre-service educators. In terms of the Montessori philosophy, identities are a part of the teaching practice in which everything can be "critiqued, revised, and improved to truly liberate and build a peaceful society" (Christensen, 2018, p. 39). Brunold-Conesa (2019) affirmed that the Montessori curriculum "promotes intercultural sensitivity" and foundational development for global citizenship (para. 6). Traditional and Montessori educators alike recognize the importance of the inclusion of race and identity work outside of and within the classroom setting. The focus on identity work can begin in training programs but must be continued throughout the educator's career.

Emerging Themes in Montessori

While there has not been a single framework chosen to develop skills in discussing race, the following have been selected as examples of how Montessori teachers and training programs are managing these changes. Themes include antibias/anti-racism principles, decolonization of

the Montessori pedagogy, and being culturally relevant and responsive. It is noted within each theme when there has been an overlap in practices and pedagogy. This overlap shows the complexity of this work and a departure from the thought that only one way of leading diversity endeavors is best for students.

Antibias, anti-racism (ABAR)

Author and Boston University professor Ibram X. Kendi (2019) famously affirmed that the opposite of *racist* is not *not racist* but that *being antiracist* means someone confronts racial inequities as an active participant. Neutrality was and will never be an option. Stevenson and Johnston (2021), co-chairs of the JEDI Committee at the American Montessori Society (AMS), wrote that as leaders in the Montessori space, they have "the opportunity to operationalize justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in every area of the organization, and resources will be continually allocated to support the creation of just communities in schools and teacher education programs" (p. 6) inclusive of antiracist principles and practices. The organization later announced that as part of their strategic priority in inclusion and equity, all AMS-affiliated teacher education programs would be required to include 12 hours of anti-bias antiracist training by June 2023 (AMS, 2022). The teacher education handbook, which all teacher education programs must abide by, was updated to "include language that supports culturally responsive teaching and learning that strengthens ABAR education" (AMS, 2022). Another accrediting Montessori organization, the Association Montessori International USA, also committed to additional social justice endeavors inclusive of equity and human rights principles (Sabater et al., 2021; Bass-Barlow & Bishop, 2021). Some Montessori schools, such as Near North Montessori and City Garden Montessori, have been committed to ABAR for years (Debs, 2016) so this addition to training programs will only solidify the work at schools that have started this journey.

Canzoneri-Golden and King (2020) found that researchers have only started to link Montessori to antibias, antiracist work within the last ten years (Ansari & Winsler, 2014; Banks & Maixner, 2016; Stansbury, 2014, as cited in Canzoneri-Golden & King, 2020). Canzoneri-Golden and King reminded the reader that "Montessori never discussed explicitly issues of racism or cultural relevancy, even though Montessori's approach to education was both scientific and anthropological" (2020, p. 47) and that "the color-blind mentality … may prove to be detrimental to students of color" (2020, p. 47). Montessori educators implementing antibias, anti-racist principles will be able to recognize racial biases and work together to create a systemic approach to minimizing and ultimately eliminate injustice in school settings.

Decolonization

Decolonization – meaning "replacing solely Western interpretations of history with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) perspectives, and restoring BIPOC culture and traditional ways" (Anderson, 2021, p. 30) – is critical to bring to the Montessori classroom. Anderson reiterated that the Montessori cultural curriculum (or the social studies curriculum) relies on significant moments in history and that "when we talk about systemic oppression, it is with the understanding that is a part of our infant country's identity, the very bedrock from which it was built, on land we viciously stole from Native Americans" (Anderson, 2021, p. 29). Schweitzer (2019) highlighted and reinforced that there have been efforts in the Montessori space dating back to 2018 to decolonize the curriculum, noting that at two separate conferences, Montessorians presented inclusivity issues and erasure in Montessori materials. Schweitzer (2019) indicated:

> When critically examining and reckoning with colonialism, however, one must accept that these concepts attributed to Montessori are colonial, though in many ways Dr.

> Montessori was a woman ahead of her time, her time was still steeped in colonialism (however supportive she was in decolonization efforts in India, for example) (p. 15).

The adjustment toward decolonization has also been a goal for Indigenous communities. Replacing Indigenous ways of being, cultural perspectives, and values within the cosmic curriculum gave one Montessori Hawaiian language immersion and culture-based program the chance to succeed (Schonleber, 2021). Participants in Schonleber's study included seven educators (all of whom were female). Six of the seven educators were Part Hawaiian or Hawaiian and all seven spoke native Hawaiian. Schonleber (2021) found that the school's goal of creating a "culturally restorative and decolonized science program that privileged and integrated deeply held Hawaiian cultural values while also accounting for the state-mandated science evaluations" (p. 17) was achieved through Dr. Montessori's ideals of the interconnectedness of all creation. The educators also equated Dr. Montessori's storytelling techniques to those historically known by Hawaiians. One teacher noted, "As a result of [learning about using the Kumulipo as a curriculum timeline], I have a guide for my lessons for the entire school year. I never had this much guidance with my curriculum" (Schonleber, 2021, p. 19).

Culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teaching

Dr. Montessori's concepts have also led educators to the realm of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining education. Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies have evolved from Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) original theory that educators can humanize their students' life experiences. Some educators, like Trisha Moquino, have sought to create more grounding environments deep within Indigenized and decolonized spaces using culturally responsive teaching practices (Torres, 2022). Tammy Oesting and Ashley Speed (2019) reported

Moquino's sentiments that culturally responsive pedagogy "allows children to naturally develop cultural competency, achieve academically, and challenge existing social inequities" (p. 50). Moquino explained that "education continues to be a subtractive one for many children of the global majority. With a culturally relevant/culturally sustaining approach, it does not have to be that way" (Oesting & Speed, 2019, p. 52).

Canzoneri-Golden and King (2020) grouped antibias, antiracism practices *and* culturally relevant pedagogy in their Montessori study, which is an approach that is becoming more common in the Montessori field of education. The goal was to improve outcomes for all students and combat deficit theories (Canzoneri-Golden & King, 2020). The authors cited that culturally relevant pedagogy often missed "sociopolitical aspects that examines institutions and … power structure" and thus concluded that using an antibias, antiracist lens would supplement those gaps (Canzoneri-Golden & King, 2020). Consistent with Canzoneri-Golden and King's work is Debs' (2016) stance that any education model that supports racial diversity and student empowerment like culturally responsive and antibias, antiracist principles benefit students, families, and educators alike. Debs (2016) also emphasized that parent narratives bring trust and community to academic spaces.

One researcher sought to find finer details within the Montessori pedagogy aligned with culturally sustaining teaching. In D'Cruz's (2022) review of the literature pertaining specifically to CSP in Montessori, the author found that there is a "lack of universal training" (p. 10) because there is very little literature about the practice. The author referenced organizations such as Embracing Equity and Montessori for Social Justice that have ties to the Montessori community and commit to equity work in and outside the classroom but reiterated that there is yet to be a "universally tangible (or intangible)" (p. 11) implementation method for culturally sustaining

teaching. Much of the work is never-ending through a series of activities or styles of teaching that adhere to Alim, Paris, and Wong's (2020) six principles and framework. D'Cruz urged schools to "explicitly move toward culturally sustaining practices" (2020, p. 12-13) and engage in retraining practices to account for the complexity of urban schools and institutional racism while also engaging deeper in internal work. D'Cruz also indicated a significant gap in the literature relating to the implementation of CSP existing in Montessori but felt hopeful that even with unknown information about educators of color leading this work and limited research, CSP would become a "strong tool of liberation for people of color" (2020, p. 16).

Social justice for peace and global citizenship

This sub-section is centered around peace education using social justice narratives. The next section will demonstrate the importance of social justice for elementary-aged students (ages 6-12 in a Montessori classroom) from a psychological and developmental perspective.

Han and Moquino (2018) indicated that "cosmic, or peace, education, while a beautiful theory, is incomplete without the historical context and connection to social justice" (p. 8). This statement alludes to relying on the educator's aptitude to adequately navigate and question social norms and abilities to effectively cater to the cosmic curriculum (Torres, 2022; Banks & Maixner, 2016). Han and Moquino (2018) suggested:

> Cosmic and peace education requires that we develop in children and in ourselves an understanding of the history of racial and social injustice and the tools to dismantle inequity, in ways that are significantly different than the current practice in most Montessori schools and programs today (p. 8).

Han and Moquino (2018) urged educators to ask themselves: "How have Montessorians perpetuated a false narrative of peace? At whose expense and why have only some children been

able to receive this idea of peace education?" (p. 8). These questions can and should be applied within the classroom context since the students can navigate tough conversations about injustice and inequity with the educator's support (Torres, 2022).

While promoting global citizenship, Dr. Montessori did not explicitly demonstrate the experiences of multiple perspectives, such as Indigenous peoples. Moquino's practices balanced that of Dr. Montessori's original work and knit together the importance of Indigenous history, cultures, and traditions through the fabric of a teacher training program (Torres, 2022). Social justice education requires educators to think holistically. Considerations for the whole child, the community, and culture, wrapped in a curriculum that caters to the original schema of Dr. Montessori's cosmic education are increasingly important (Banks and Maixner, 2016).

The Importance of Social Justice in Montessori Elementary Classrooms

Students in the second plane of development are ripe for social justice, a crucial but unintentional aspect of what Dr. Montessori called *the cosmic task* (Torres, 2022). As elementary students leave the first plane of development, four major areas grow within them. During this time, from six to twelve years old, imagination and socialization increase, and equally important, moral development and social consciousness begin to blossom (Torres, 2022).

Students develop what Paula Polk Lillard called the "intellectual endowments," and Dr. Montessori called the "Intellectual Period" (Lillard, 1996). The student is riddled with questions about everything presented to them – with *why, how,* and *when* at the core – a product of the developing reasoning skills that make it possible to absorb an enormous amount of culture and their place within the world (Lillard, 1996; Montessori, 2007; Montessori, 2020). Lillard (1996) also described students' need to fight against injustices as they learn them. Dr. Montessori (2007) wrote that the student indeed develops that sense of justice but must also have an "intimate

blend" between the cultural environment and the practice and social life to bridge the understanding of life in practice.

Ethnic Studies and Similar Programs

As part of this action research, I found there are programs (often called *ethnic studies* or *multicultural programs*) that exist to celebrate and affirm people from systematically marginalized communities. These programs were often created because students of these communities disengaged from the course materials or students dropped out of high school to seek other opportunities rather than be remediated. Programs like the ones listed below showcase what Montessori programs can become.

Marshall (2021) argued that students need opportunities to see themselves in the curriculum in meaningful ways. The textbooks' emphasis over the years on a single story with disconnected or decontextualized information abuses the histories of those untold (Marshall, 2021). Marshall determined that leaning into equitable practices and focusing on historical omissions could be keys to student success. Scholars like Marshall have understood the importance of student reflection and multiple cultural life experiences in the curriculum through multicultural or ethnic studies programs (Au, 2014; Bigelow, 2014; Carberry, 2014; Rodriguez, 2014).

In 1998, Curtis Acosta – a high school teacher – established the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program in Tucson, Arizona, for K-12 classrooms. Acosta and Mir (2012) described the MAS program as one that was "born from generations of systemic failure" (p. 16). The program was designed to celebrate Chicanos/Latinos using a Latino Critical Race Theory framework emphasizing Latino students (Acosta & Mir, 2012). However, Acosta's program received negative attention from the state and was ultimately banned in January 2012 through the

passage of HB 2281 (Rodriguez, 2014). Activist groups across the city and state banded together in hopes of saving the program. In 2017, the ban on the program and House Bill 2281 were deemed unconstitutional based on racial biases (Bigelow, 2014; Carberry, 2014).

Au (2014) described a "secret" set of classes taught at his high school where students merely heard about the course through word-of-mouth knowledge – one course was colloquially called African studies, but on paper, it was called "Language Arts 10b and Social Studies elective" (Au, 2014, p. 85). Au distinctly remembered its African-centric focus and how his teacher pushed his Black students with a different kind of academic rigor that focused on a critical dialog about tough issues.

In 2021, California became the first state to require students to enroll in and complete a course in ethnic studies for the fulfillment of a high school diploma. Pawel (2021) defined ethnic studies as a program that emphasizes "history and literature about the struggles and triumphs of people whose voices have often been omitted from traditional texts and classroom readings" (para. 5). Pawel noted that ethnic studies, or some form of it, had been in effect and supported in various capacities in California dating back to the late 1960s (2021, para. 12).

The author also notes that at least eight other states with ethnic studies electives are offered (Pawel, 2021). Washington state was one such state that began developing ethnic studies programs and study material for grades 7-12 in 2018 and expanded to K-12 through Senate Bill 6066 in 2021 (Washington Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee, n.d.). The Ethnic Studies Framework has been crosswalked with the social studies learning standards (Washington Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee, n.d.).

Each of these programs, and similar thoughts in the creation of affirming cultural histories, especially for a researcher such as myself (a person of the Global Majority), continues

to promote resilience and positive self-efficacy. As I read about each program and their programs staying active, I felt joy seeing communities fight to keep these programs alive. The fight to retain these programs and the creation of new programs across the country reminds us of our progress.

Conclusion

The existing literature supports further research and action plans in diversity work. While there are firm stances in nearly all pieces of research on the inclusion of understanding oppressive systems and histories, the inclusion of identity and race work, and generally some sort of diversity-explicit programming in K-12 environments, there is very little research at this time directly tied to Montessori. The research field in Montessori is proliferating, and more undergraduate and graduate programs foster research.

The literature often alludes to internal work and the never-ending learning/unlearning and reflection cycle. Several Montessori-related studies have concluded that the importance of transformational teacher work in teacher education programs and beyond is necessary. Still, additional gaps exist in creating a framework or standardization across the field. The American Montessori Society opting to require ABAR work in its teacher education programs is a sign that the domain is changing drastically.

Methodology

The main purpose of this action research was to learn more about my heritage, culture, and history through a variety of media and then apply that information to an equity audit of the Montessori social studies curriculum. To examine self-efficacy and resilience, I split my action research into two parts during the data collection period. The total intervention was six weeks in length, divided equally. The first three weeks were used to learn and gather information, while an

equity audit occurred during the second three weeks. This study lasted from early September to mid-October, with each session completed in one-hour increments. I was the sole participant in this action research. This section will describe the data tools and the data collection process.

Data tools

Three tools were used daily, capturing five days' worth of data each week. Because the intervention was split into two major parts (see the *Learning* and *Application* headings for additional detail), capturing data daily was essential with these three tools.

The first tool (Appendix A) was an attitude scale (a Likert with a 1-5 rating scale) designed to capture general feelings after the session ended. There were eight statements for this attitude scale, with answers ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This scale would provide a set of quantitative data for measuring feelings I held as I learned more about Indigenous, Black, and Latino/a culture throughout the study. Next, a short-form and guided daily questionnaire (Appendix B) was used. This tool presented six questions to offer succinct qualitative data. This tool was used to gauge my ability to recognize patterns of repeated difficulty or uncertainty as I navigated the study. A third data tool was a journal for reflection. For this journal, I did not use any guided prompts. I recorded my notes after all other data collection tools were used and at the end of each intervention session. The journal captured high-level themes that the remaining tools would not have captured.

The final tool, the Equity Audit Curriculum Checklist (Appendix C), was adapted from the Greater Lakes Equity Center's "Assessing bias in standards and curricular materials" tool (Coomer et al. 2017). I designed the tool to be answered with a yes/no binary; the goal was to answer the ten statements or questions with "yes" after the intervention. There was no penalty for answering "no" – it was used to indicate if further work needed to be done in the revision process

and to bring fidelity across each lesson's analysis. This tool was only used during the second half of the intervention period (the Application period) alongside the other three data collection tools. Further information on how Appendix C was used can be found in the Application section. Appendices A-C are provided for future replication and clarification purposes.

Weeks 1-3: Learning

Over the course of three weeks (the Learning period), I engaged in work to educate myself about my own culture's history, Puerto Rico, and several key topics relating to the island, such as identity and the Taino Indigenous people. I assigned a variety of media to this period. Options included podcast episodes, short videos of history lessons, book chapters, articles, documentaries, newscasts, and some original content videos on identity and culture from creators at Buzzfeed | Pero Like division.

This content was selected namely to explore my heritage through alternative historical perspectives. The data from these three weeks would gauge whether I felt resilient and had strong self-efficacy in two areas: affirming the histories and stories of people of the Global Majority and creating new, diverse material that aligned with Montessori while retaining culturally sustaining practices. In this action research, strong self-efficacy and resilience were defined as a belief in the ability to execute the curriculum as a person from the Global Majority without feeling taxed or overwhelmed by the difficulty of expansive perspectives throughout time. As mentioned in the *Data tools* section, only three of the four data collection tools were used during this period since the fourth tool would only pertain to the Application period.

Weeks 4-6: Application

In the second half of my intervention period, I took the knowledge I gained from the Learning period and applied it to my Montessori lessons. At the start of these three weeks, I

identified several lessons from the History and Geography curriculum that would be good candidates for an equity review. Each day, I committed to one of three practices: reviewing an existing lesson, editing an existing lesson, and/or creating a new one. In addition to using Appendices A, B, and the reflective journal each day, I began to use Appendix C (the Checklist) in my data collection.

After each intervention session, I filled out the Equity Audit Curriculum Checklist. The first question asked how I used the checklist for that day. This initial question would provide data on how I opted to use the tool during each day's session, as the intervention was fluid. Reviewing an original lesson would provide critical data on whether the baseline was inclusive and equitable. Reviewing the lesson after revisions would provide another layer of quantifiable data on whether I made sufficient changes based on the key indicators listed in the checklist. Finally, I would review a lesson I created after noticing an area of growth and use the tool to support these changes. I anticipated this tool being used for those initial three uses but provided a fourth option of "Other" to account for unanticipated adjustments during this process as a failsafe. Each checklist statement or question had a secondary, optional short-answer field. This field could be used to elaborate on a "yes" or "no" answer to the previous question.

I have redacted all personal information regarding the trainer whose lessons I reviewed and from which training center these lessons originated to maintain confidentiality. It was not my intention to critique the intellectual property of an original author (or trainer, in this sense) nor would it benefit the Montessori community to do so. This act of discretion acts as a buffer to prevent future researchers from making assumptions about any author's intentions.

Data Analysis

With the tools listed in the previous section, I collected six weeks of data. My analyses were qualitative and quantitative in nature. While only one tool was explicitly quantitative (Appendix A, the Attitude Scale), I was also able to quantify data with the Equity Audit Curriculum Checklist (Appendix C). The qualitative evidence was extracted from the daily written journal responses and open responses from the other data tools.

The data in Figure 1 show the average scores for each week by question in the Attitude Scale. As a reminder, the original ratings used a Likert scale from 1-5, from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The daily ratings for each question were aggregated into weekly averages to show the trend across all six weeks. It is important to note that Figure 1 has three columns of removed data (Weeks 1-3 for the "I am finding it easy to make changes to the curriculum" statement). During those three weeks, I intentionally responded "Neutral" (or a "3" on the Likert) for the statement about making changes to the curriculum as I had not yet started to make changes. While the averages for each of those three weeks would have all been "Neutral," I felt it would be better to indicate the limited but intentional responses and retracted data.

In week one, I felt strongest (4.6) about being deeply connected to the work and did not feel powerless (1.4). The following week, I scored "I feel deeply connected with the work I am doing" and "this work continues to motivate me" as Strongly Agree. At week four, I still felt strongly connected to the work (4.8) and motivated by the work (4.8) but was averaging a 3.8 (between Neutral and Agree) on how easy I found making changes to the curriculum. These high scores indicate the excitement to begin this action research study.

Figure 1.

Weekly averages on the Daily Attitude Scale

Daily Attitude	Learning			Application		
	W1	*W2*	*W3*	*W4*	*W5*	*W6*
I feel positive about my progress today.	3.4	4.3	3.4	4.5	4	**3.6**
I feel deeply connected with the work I am doing.	**4.6**	**5**	3.8	**4.8**	**4.2**	**3.6**
This work strengthens my inner self.	4.4	4	3.2	4.3	3.8	3
This work continues to motivate me.	4.4	**5**	**4.4**	**4.8**	**4.2**	3.2
I am finding it easy to make changes to the curriculum.	--	--	--	3.8	3.2	**3.6**
I feel grief.	1.8	2.5	1.4	1	1.2	2.4
I feel powerless.	1.4	3	1.8	1	1.4	2.8
This work makes me angry.	2.6	3	1.6	2	2	2.8

Note. The highest ratings each week by column are in bold.

By the end of the study, in weeks five and six, I had much lower overall scores across the week in all areas on the Attitude Scale. Inversely, looking closer at the data from weeks two and six, negative statements ("I feel grief," "I feel powerless," and "This work makes me angry") were rated higher than any of the other four weeks during the study. These statements were negative in nature and therefore were calibrated and coded differently. While these scores are higher, they do not indicate a positive reaction.

In examining the reflection journal responses, I had indicated that I was "mentally exhausted" from the process and that I needed to remind myself what was "most important to me: telling the stories of those who could not tell their own." By the final week of the study, I had started feeling less capable of making revisions but was still interested in doing so. As written in the reflection journal on day 26, I believed the declining ratings and lack of feeling connected to the material was the set of lessons themselves. In an entry, I wrote:

> The way my lessons are set up don't provide me with a lot of creative space as an adult (and Montessorian) and so it took more time in the thinking process instead of implementing. The existing lessons feel so cut and dry, and I feel like it has trained me to function in the same way, with very little joy and with even less extrapolation of the information to apply toward groups of people living in any given location. This was certainly a test of judgment and skill for me.

Even while these feelings resonated across multiple days, I could still feel deeply connected to the work as I revised the curriculum (as shown in Figure 2). Of the fourteen days that I made revisions, there were only two days where I rated “deeply connected to the work” as a Strongly Disagree: day 19 and day 24. These two days were the lowest rated for both categories. In both instances, the reflection journal entries demonstrated that the lack of connection was due to the lesson I had chosen for each day. On day 19, I noted the following:

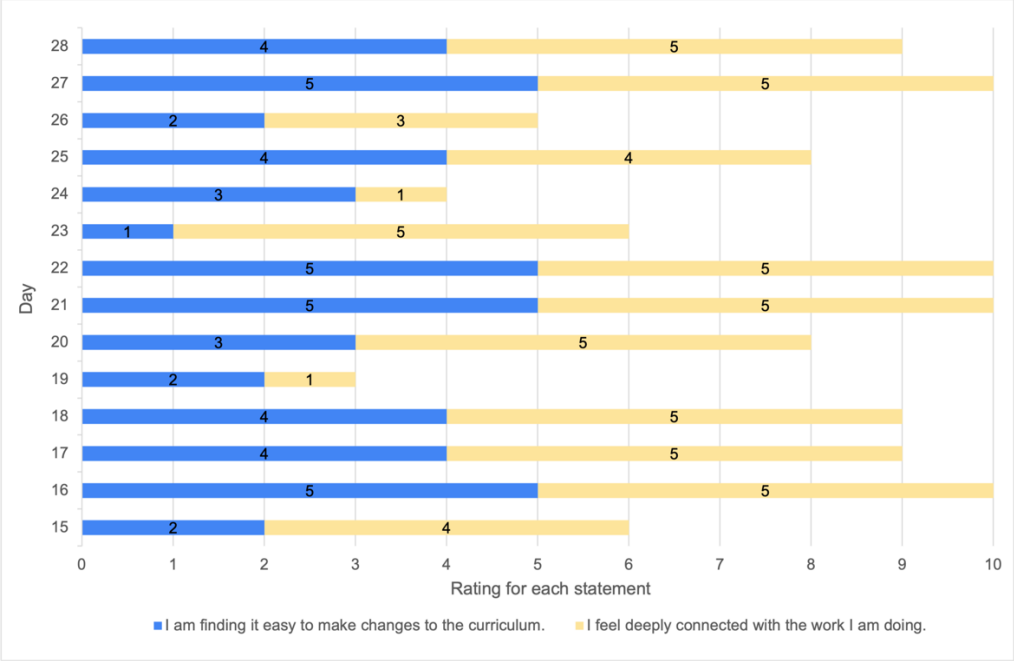
> The lessons are often very vague and from what I can remember from when I taught these lessons, I always had to find more information to understand the material. I also remember these lessons being basic -- very few details about any people or cultures as we studied things like vegetation zones, climate zones, etc. Why wouldn't we add discussions about how hurricanes happen often in the Tropics and affect certain countries more than others that exist in other zones? Why wouldn't we give clear examples for students when we expect them to become global citizens?

On day 24, I was not able to revise the lesson of that day because I felt the original lesson continued to be vague and required more fact-finding effort. Between days 25 and 27, I noted my previous failures in making revisions and decided to reevaluate my approach to augmenting

original lesson content. By day 27, I felt both deeply connected and found it easy to make changes to the curriculum.

Figure 2.

Comparisons of making changes to curriculum and feeling deeply connected



In that day's reflection journal, I wrote:

> Today I went back to the basics. I watched this Bill Keegan video weeks ago and wanted to find a way to come back to it. Today I was able to transcribe his video to use for the Great Lessons as a supplemental origin story for the learners to have on deck. There are origin stories all across the world, so why not add something that has meaning to me? I believe today's addition was a simple but effective notion toward inclusivity and sustaining culture. I'm not sure what I would like to do tomorrow. Maybe I need to keep

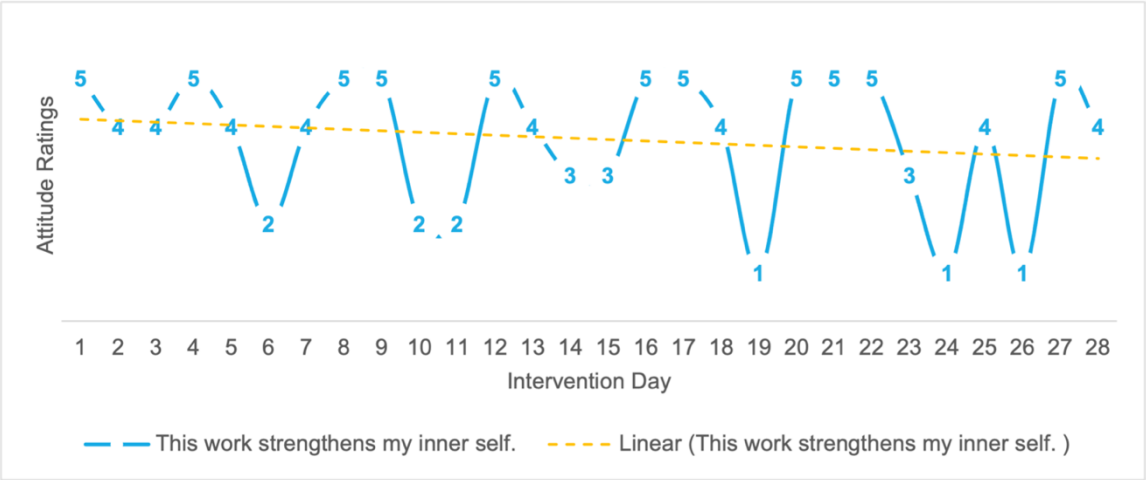
my mind actively thinking about how I don't need to "recreate" the wheel. There are resources available to me that can easily be compiled into this!

I had gotten over the hurdle of feeling boxed into using existing lessons by creating a new lesson using resources I had saved during the Learning period.

The Attitude Scale had a statement titled, “this work strengthens my inner self.” This statement was used to examine resilience. While there were 11 instances of rating the statement as Strongly Agree, the linear trendline showed declined ratings over time, as shown in Figure 3. These results were surprising as I hypothesized that my resilience would remain high having control over the curriculum solely revising from an anti-bias, anti-racist lens. While I measured resilience as “strengthening my inner self,” it might have been more effective to measure it as the ability to continue coming back to the audit willingly. Nearly every day, I had written in the journal how I was ready to try the next day again, no matter how difficult it might have been.

Figure 3.

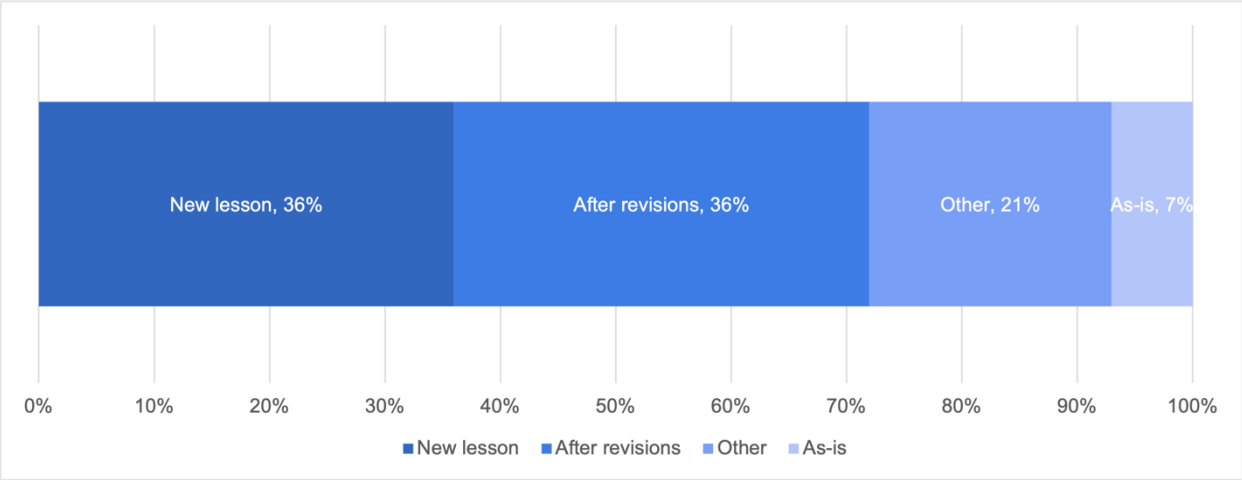
Ratings on the Attitude Scale



I used the Equity Audit Curriculum Checklist in four ways during the Application Period. I reviewed a new lesson I created, a lesson after revisions (either new or existing), or an original lesson. These three were the intended uses for this Checklist, but I included an extra line (named "Other") to indicate ways I would use the tool that did not fit into the original three categories. Figure 4 shows that I reviewed a new lesson I created five times, or 36% of the time, to confirm whether I'd met the Equity Audit indicators.

Figure 4.

Equity Audit Curriculum Checklist use cases



Equally as often, I reviewed a lesson after I made revisions. In only one instance (7%), I reviewed an original lesson before making revisions. The "Other" category was used three times (21%). I provided further explanation for those three as follows:

- "I'm reviewing the remainder of the lesson I started yesterday (a new lesson I created)."
- "I transcribed an origin story to add to the great lessons so the story of the Taino people is told."

- "I created a set of card material information to be used alongside the Fundamental Needs lesson."

In each of the three instances, these responses could have been grouped into one of the existing categories. However, the data collected suggests that I felt discomfort in categorizing how I used the tool. There were thirteen lessons at the end of the intervention. Of those lessons, seven were created by me. Seven were History and six were Geography lessons. Each of the new lessons created was nested beneath existing lessons to augment what was being taught.

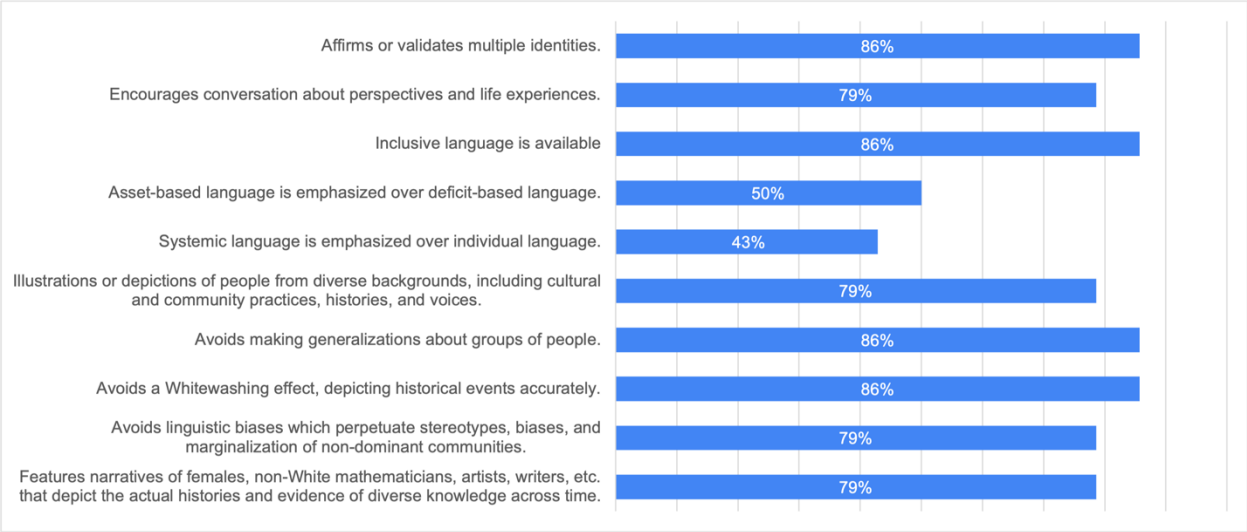
Of the four data tools, the Equity Audit Curriculum Checklist had some of the most interesting data collected. As each statement, or indicator, was routinely checked during the review process, the results showed that eight of the ten indicators were incorporated quite often. Half of those eight indicators were met 86% of the time and the other 79% of the time. Two indicators scored significantly lower. The "asset-based language" indicator was only met 50% of the time, and the "systemic language" indicator was even lower at 43%, as shown in Figure 5.

In the comments area for each of these two indicators, I was able to elaborate why I answered a certain way. In all instances, I indicated some variation of "the language is neutral" or "there is no language or phrase like this." Below are the two indicators and examples that were listed in the data tool:

- Asset-based language is emphasized over deficit-based language (*i.e., developing nation vs. third-world country*).
- Systemic language is emphasized over individual language (*i.e., enslaved people vs. slaves*).

Figure 5.

Indicator(s) met during equity audit



It was not common to see these phrases in the lessons I reviewed. However, the exclusion of these phrases should also be noted. When these phrases are excluded from the narrative, it begs the reader to wonder if there is a missing perspective or a bias in the information presented. In the lessons that I selected, only one instance required a change from “slave” to “enslaved.”

Discussion

This study's goal was to observe teacher resilience and self-efficacy levels during an equity audit of the Montessori social studies curriculum. As the researcher and participant, I measured lower levels of resilience but high levels of self-efficacy. These results suggested that despite my expertise as an equity researcher, a curriculum overhaul was emotionally taxing for me as a person of color.

As this type of study is both biased and complex, it indicates that this work must continue in a different setting. With time, I see future studies and research findings understanding the

longitudinal effects of inclusive curricula, such as ABAR, decolonization, culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teaching, or social justice as a generic umbrella.

This study was conducted over six weeks, but similar studies could be conducted over the course of multiple years to capture a teacher's sense of resilience and self-efficacy as their knowledge bank in practice increases. Peer relationships and open conversations will be necessary as future researchers engage participants. Additional recommendations for educators and researchers attempting to replicate this study would be to extend the scope of this work beyond the social studies curriculum. This study focused on history and geography, but it is recommended that all future work broaden to all aspects of the curriculum, including community policies and unspoken or unwritten norms. For example, the grace and courtesy curriculum extends beyond the classroom and would benefit from a culturally sustaining review. Including the community of stakeholders, such as families, in non-academic curricular and policy changes would also ensure that all perspectives and traditions are respected and celebrated.

Upon reflection on the data tools, the current set of tools should remain for future replication of this study. However, it should be noted that the Attitude Scale may need alternative statements for measuring self-efficacy and resilience than are currently written. The written statements did not consider the ability to bounce back from stressful days. Statements might include notions about perseverance. It would also benefit the researcher to rephrase the statements so that they all mirror the same style of positive or negative skew (i.e., the current statement says, "I feel powerless," which skews negatively, but many of the previous statements skew positively, and therefore a new statement might be better reflected as "I do not feel powerless"). This minor change would engage the participant in only one way rather than switching between positive and negative statements.

Professional development recommendations

I also propose that in addition to the current ABAR requirements laid out by the American Montessori Society, a percentage of all professional development requirements for Montessori educators and staff also include an aspect of ABAR work. As this work is never-ending, educators should continue developing these internal skills throughout their careers. For example, if 50 hours over the course of five years is the basic requirement for professional development, 20% (or 10 hours) must be dedicated to antibias, and antiracist education. This professional development recommendation includes educators who received their credentials before July 2013. The American Montessori Society urges all credential holders to engage in continuing development but only requires it for those who received their credentials after July 1, 2013 (AMS, n.d.).

Limitations

This action research demonstrated limitations as a self-study. One variable that affected self-efficacy and resilience is that at the time of this research, I was not actively in a school setting, either as a coach who supports Montessori teachers or a teacher in a Montessori elementary classroom. While the data suggests a deep connection to equity and low feelings of resilience, these feelings of resiliency and self-efficacy might differ if I were in either of the previously mentioned positions at the time of the study. Being removed from an education setting where I might otherwise have had access to real-time feedback from students or colleagues could have impacted results.

Another study variable is my explicit personal bias for Caribbean life experiences and perspectives. Therefore, while my goal was to review lessons with a culturally sustaining lens, I

often reached for options that reflected my ancestors rather than those of other cultures. This was demonstrated throughout the Application period as I navigated the audit process.

A final variable that added complexity to the study is the bias toward inner critical judgment on the progress of the equity audit. While each day during the Application period produced content, I had difficulty feeling fulfilled and satisfied with my progress for the day. I only felt impressed by my progress at the end when I realized that I'd created a packet that was 29 pages in length. This packet had 13 revised or new lessons. My inner critic would not allow me to see how much I had modified and added until the study was over.

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Appendix A

Attitude Scale

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5

Please rate the following statements using the Likert scale above.

1. I feel positive about my progress today.
2. I feel deeply connected with the work I am doing.
3. This work strengthens my inner self.
4. This work continues to motivate me.
5. I am finding it easy to make changes to the curriculum.
6. I feel grief.
7. I feel hopeless.
8. I feel powerless.
9. This work makes me angry.

Appendix B

Questionnaire

Describe what you did today.

What feelings do you hold at this time?

Describe any **successes** you had during your audit today.

Describe any **failures** you had during your audit today.

Is there anything you'd like to explore further?

What else would you like to share?

Appendix C

Equity Audit Curriculum Checklist

Adapted from the *Assessing Bias in Standards & Curricular Materials*[1] Tool.

Indicators	✓
The language used affirms or validates multiple identities.	
The lesson encourages conversation about perspectives and life experiences.	
The use of inclusive language (i.e., families vs. parents, they vs. he/she) is available	
Asset-based language is emphasized over deficit-based language (i.e., developing nation vs. third world country).	
Systemic language is emphasized over individual language (i.e., enslaved people vs. slaves).	
The lesson and its complementary materials include illustrations or depictions of people from diverse backgrounds, including cultural and community practices, histories, and voices.	
The lesson and materials avoid making generalizations about groups of people.	
The lesson and materials avoid a Whitewashing effect, depicting historical events accurately (may include events rooted in racism, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, sexism, and inter-group conflict).	
The lesson avoids linguistic biases which perpetuate stereotypes, biases, and marginalization of non-dominant communities (i.e., own, mastery, wandering, saving, forefathers).	
The lesson and materials feature narratives of females, non-White mathematicians, artists, writers, etc. that depict the actual histories and evidence of diverse knowledge across time.	

Written responses on page 2.

[1] Coomer, M. N., et. al. (2017). Assessing bias in standards and curricular materials. *Equity Tool*. Indianapolis, IN: Great Lakes Equity Center.

Explanation and Evidence of Audit Adjustments

Additional Recommendations or Considerations for Review