

Cultural relevance in teacher training

How we bring relevance and responsiveness to the MTR

NCMPS STAFF

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector's Montessori Teacher Residency (NCMTR) prioritizes culturally relevant and responsive education. This article was adapted from the NC-MTR Curriculum Manual.

Three decades ago, Gloria Ladson-Billings proposed culturally relevant pedagogy, “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate.”

The concept has assumed a central role in teacher education, inspiring a generation of teachers to enter the classroom with a renewed commitment to affirming students’ cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector’s Montessori Teacher Residency centers culturally responsive pedagogy in its Montessori teacher preparation.

In *But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1995), Ladson-Billings identified three features of culturally relevant pedagogy:

- **all students** are **experiencing academic success**
 - students are **actively developing and practicing cultural competence**
 - students are **developing and practicing a “critical consciousness”** that helps them challenge inequities they see in the world
- In 2018, Geneva Gay, building



All students are achieving academic success

upon the work of Ladson-Billings and others, called for a pedagogical shift to **culturally responsive teaching**. Recognizing that education in the United States has predominantly drawn on and affirmed Eurocentric values, experiences, and culture, culturally responsive teaching asks educators to transform learning by “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.”

This means teachers should:

- learn about and appreciate cultures other than their own
- offer learning opportunities that draw upon the strengths of children’s home cultures
- allow children to embody their full selves as people and as learners

Montessori curriculum and pedagogy is conceptually framed to support culturally relevant and responsive teaching, although these elements need to be made explicit in teacher preparation.

Academic success

Montessori education has been shown to support the academic

achievement of all children, by engaging children’s interest in a strong curriculum, and by fostering a safe, healthy learning environment.

A culture of success: “Success” in a Montessori education context means the fullest possible development of an individual’s human potential and interdependency with their social group. This is the expectation teachers should have for children and themselves. Teachers can work to observe and counteract biases, make sure to support children of all abilities, and keep Montessori’s inherent asset-based orientation in the forefront.

Relevant and responsive curriculum: By planning lessons based on observation and student’s acquired knowledge, Montessori teachers inherently respect and respond to each student’s individual strengths and approaches to learning. Teachers can review their lesson plans and records to ensure that a robust set of presentations is offered to all children and that all children are learning.

Learning opportunities that enrich children’s lives: Montessori, framed as an “aid to life” and an environment

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for supporting human development, designs all learning experiences to enrich lives, foster human flourishing, and provide a foundation for future learning.

An environment in which children develop and maintain a positive academic self-image: In a learning environment of engagement and discovery, rather than one of compulsion and competition, children in Montessori classrooms can find and share their unique strengths and celebrate those of others they work with. Multi-aged, individualized, self-paced classrooms support differentiated learning without negatively highlighting differences.

Cultural competency

Cultural competency, “the ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one’s own” (DeAngelis, 2015), is built into the Montessori curriculum, but needs to be consistently emphasized.

- Preschool-aged children are exposed to lessons with globes, maps, and culturally diverse materials to explore, and can be engaged in culturally diverse presentations and activities.
- The Elementary Cultural curriculum, loosely corresponding to Social Studies, uses a rich assemblage of stories, charts, and hands-on experiences to emphasize the unity, diversity, and interdependency of human cultures around the world.
- Children at all ages participate in circle times and community meetings which offer opportunities for children to engage with adults and with each other, speaking and listening, taking turns, and learning to see things from various perspectives.
- Montessori teachers should take particular care that diverse cultures are represented, affirmed, and

engaged with in classroom décor, cultural materials such as art, literature, and music, and cultural practices.

Development of critical consciousness

Critical consciousness is “the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom, using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Montessori education helps develop this ability from an early age.

Student voice: Montessori education begins with authentic and respectful interactions with children. Even the youngest should have a say in their classroom and school.

Ownership and responsibility in their environments: Young children in the three-to-six age group undertake real-world tasks and solve real world-problems consistent with their abilities from the very beginning, taking active roles in cleaning, maintaining, and beautifying their classrooms. Teachers should take care that diverse cultural practical life activities are included, building belonging and understanding. These lessons introduce children to responsibility and stewardship of community, foundations of critical consciousness that will extend beyond their classrooms into their homes and, eventually, into their wider communities and world.

Connecting learning opportunities to the real world: Young children interact with real-world cultural and natural objects that are brought into the classroom, and in appropriately scaled interactions with nature and culture in their school and neighborhood.

For elementary-aged children, interaction with the larger world is integral to Montessori practice through “Going Out” (learning expeditions sparked by child interest and planned and directed as much as possible by

the children themselves). Children may also invite guests from their families and community, and from local Indigenous communities, to share knowledge, experiences, and stories. Teachers should not shy away from engaging with elementary children’s developmental sense of fairness and justice when real-world manifestations of inequity present themselves, and can foster age-appropriate yet critical conversations with children of any age.

Culturally responsive practices

Montessori classrooms provide ample opportunities for teachers to create environments that reflect and affirm each child’s identity, recognizing and valuing the knowledge and strengths children bring with them.

- Children should see themselves and their home cultures reflected, affirmed, and engaged with in the classroom’s books, lessons, and materials.
- Classroom decor should include works of art by artists representative of children’s heritages.
- Classroom rituals, such as greetings, meal time, community meetings, and clean up should be intentionally inclusive of the whole community’s cultural norms and practices.
- Practical activities, including Practical Life exercises in the Children’s House, should reflect a diversity of cultural approaches.
- Peaceful conflict resolution should be explicitly taught, along with respect for different cultures and norms. Kindness should be explicitly modeled, and children should see and learn that they can have agency and can advocate for themselves and others when unkind or hurtful things happen.

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- Teachers should consider the myriad cultural norms children bring with them, take care to welcome them all without privileging one over another, and work with the group to build a shared understanding of community norms and expectations.

Teachers should welcome and support learners' diverse communication and learning styles by:

- offering space for silent, independent work as well opportunities for collaborative conversation.
- providing seating options, allowing for children to work on a rug, on a floor height table, or at a table and chair.
- encouraging emergent bilingualism and translanguaging, including sign language.

Beyond the classroom

Montessori schools can enact cultural responsiveness beyond the classroom, by:

- building community partnerships, mentorship, and a dynamic connection between school and home.

- actively seeking input and collaboration with families and caregivers, and sustaining authentic partnerships that support children and families, build inclusive communities, and encourage mutual investment.
- participating in ongoing Anti-Bias Anti-Racist (ABAR) professional development, exploring how to support multilingual learners, and considering the experiences of children from minoritized communities.

The Montessori classroom can offer all children the opportunity to learn, to flourish, and to become their strongest selves. The materials and activities allow children to begin to understand their own and others' identities, cultures, languages, and backgrounds. Adults in the environment can model the practices of critical consciousness and seek to dismantle the status quo, creating a strong partnership with caregivers and other mentors from the community. The more a school leans into considering diverse perspectives,

being friendly with error within themselves, and getting comfortable with being uncomfortable as new, sometimes tough information is learned, the more the school and the learners within will thrive as the whole of the child is honored and responded to each day of the year.

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