



Mortarboard Review: Montessori-Related Dissertations 2023

Joel Parham, JRP Consulting & Research
Jennifer D. Moss, Emporia State University
Katie Keller Wood, Cincinnati Montessori Secondary Teacher Education Program

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Abstract: This is the second article in an ongoing series, published annually, highlighting a selection of English-language dissertations from the previous calendar year related to Montessori philosophy and education. Thirteen doctoral dissertations completed and approved during the 2023 calendar year were identified. The authors selected three dissertations to spotlight because they represent high-quality research in an area that is relevant to the current educational landscape: antibias and anti-racist (ABAR) educational practices.

Each year, doctoral students around the world complete their programs in higher education by writing and defending their dissertations. These students have completed a significant project that results in a thoroughly researched manuscript. Unfortunately, these papers are not widely indexed and may be stored only within an institutional repository or a database devoted solely to dissertations and theses. This process limits exposure to other scholars, yet many of these works make valuable contributions to the field. This article is part of an annual series that spotlights doctoral dissertations from the previous year that are relevant to the field of Montessori education and research. This article highlights three of the 13 dissertations considered from 2023 (see the Appendix for a list of all 13 dissertations considered).

As with the previous review in this series, the authors began the selection process with a search across databases and repositories with international coverage of dissertations and theses: EBSCO Open Dissertations (<https://biblioboard.com/opendissertations>), Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD; <http://search.ndltd.org>), Open Access Theses and Dissertations (<https://oatd.org>), and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (<https://www.proquest.com>). The authors then compiled a list, which yielded 13 unique dissertations in English from the 2023 calendar year.

These dissertations were then categorized by topic or subject matter. This exercise indicated that most of the works focused on the practices of Montessori educators. Given this commonality, we decided to focus our reviews

on works that addressed this topic with a keen focus on those that dealt with timely issues of culturally responsive practices. Our evaluation excluded any dissertations that were subsequently published (e.g., article, book), and all dissertations were evaluated on their own merit regardless of the university's status (e.g., nonprofit/for-profit, public/private, religious/secular).

Antibias and Anti-Racist Practices in Montessori Programs

The three dissertations we selected to review focus on culturally responsive practices that are practiced within the Montessori classroom and their presence in Montessori training programs. The concepts and practices of antibias and anti-racist (ABAR) education have a history rooted in what is known as critical pedagogy, which relies on foundational texts by Paulo Freire (1968), Henry Giroux (1988, 2011), bell hooks (1994, 2003), Peter McLaren (1989, 2016), and, more recently, Zaretta Hammond (2015), among others. Critical pedagogy is a philosophy that encompasses several pedagogical practices that emphasize racial and social justice (e.g., anti-oppressive education, antibias curriculum, anti-racist education) to address the unique needs and experiences of BIPOC educators and students, who have historically been overlooked, dismissed, and denigrated.

From teacher preparation to educator practices to learning environments, White cultural structures and practices have historically predominated Montessori schools and many other educational models (Debs, 2019). Through a critical pedagogical lens, it is readily apparent that this foundation is exclusive, inequitable, and unresponsive to the needs of BIPOC communities. The Montessori community within the United States is actively attempting to counteract this unfortunate reality through intentional actions and practices that seek to center BIPOC experiences and cultural practices. To this end, the following reviews seek to highlight the work of three doctoral students who are engaged in this arena.

Bass-Barlow, K. (2023). *Examination of Montessori training: Experiences of People of Color in public and charter Montessori schools* [Doctoral dissertation, Arkansas State University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2856660597>

In this dissertation, KaLinda Bass-Barlow centers the experiences of teachers of color in Montessori

teacher training¹ provided by Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) training centers. For this phenomenological study, Bass-Barlow interviewed 14 teachers of color about their experiences moving through AMI Montessori teacher training, asking each participant nine questions related to their experiences of working in a public Montessori school while enrolled in or after being enrolled in AMI training. The interview questions included inquiries concerning the workload of training, balancing work and training, experiences of travel required for training, and financial implications of training. The interview questions also included opportunities for participants to make suggestions to AMI based on their training experiences, to describe their feelings about training, and to describe how training prepared them to be effective educators in Montessori classrooms. Participants fit one of three categories, and thus shared their experiences from one of three perspectives: teaching in public settings after completion of the AMI Montessori teacher training (five participants), teaching in a public Montessori school while enrolled in AMI teacher training (five participants), and working as a Montessori assistant under a trained teacher while enrolled in AMI teacher training (four participants).

Bass-Barlow is successful in executing a primary aim of her study: sharing the perspectives of BIPOC Montessori teachers, an area of vital need both in educational spaces generally and in Montessori education specifically. The rich descriptions from her interviews paint a picture of some of the ways these participants experienced their Montessori training and their work in public settings. For this reason alone, Bass-Barlow's work makes a vital contribution to the field. A second noteworthy contribution Bass-Barlow makes to the field of education research generally and Montessori research specifically is in identifying and recommending topics for continued scholarship, based on her findings. With this dissertation being, perhaps, the only study related to the experiences of BIPOC teachers in Montessori training, Bass-Barlow's important findings merit attention and expanded inquiry.

Findings from this study related to five themes: experiences of training, training work/course load, social emotional wellness, training deficits, and financial implications. Several findings were consistent with prior

1. Although the journal typically uses the term *teacher preparation*, we follow the dissertation author's use of the term *teacher training* for this article.

research on Montessori teacher training generally (e.g., Cossentino, 2009), including findings that the training was described as meaningful, complex, and challenging, requiring significant time and focus. Participants felt that training should incorporate more content related to special education, cultural competencies, and classroom management. Some participants described significant financial obligations, including unexpected costs for album and material making, that were part of their program. However, one finding that was not expected by the researcher was a significant impact of training on participants' mental health and well-being. This theme emerged in relation to a variety of other themes, including travel, time pressure, stress related to examinations, and other aspects of training. Bass-Barlow reported that "At least one trainee from each group shared experiences they considered to be traumatizing" (p. 99). Bass-Barlow asserts that this leads to the most significant implication of the study: a need for further research into the social and emotional wellness of individuals (and especially persons of color) who are enrolled in training programs. In addition to a call for additional research, Bass-Barlow offers several relevant suggestions for Montessori programs, including a need to pay attention to the impact of training on mental health and well-being. Bass-Barlow suggests that the programs should incorporate mindfulness activities, offer health and wellness days (without penalizing attendance) by adding additional days to the academic calendar, create space for reflective journaling, and provide support teams and assistance programs for any students experiencing acute stress or other mental health challenges.

Another striking finding of Bass-Barlow's study was the description of "Montessori trainers who were insensitive or unaware of the perceptions of POC" (p. 114), indicating a need for all Montessori trainers to demonstrate proficiency in culturally responsive teaching practices, ensuring cultural representation in materials and training environments.

One facet of study design not thoroughly explained by Bass-Barlow was the decision to focus exclusively on teachers with experience of AMI teacher training programs, rather than potentially also including teachers with experience of American Montessori Society teacher training programs, or programs accredited by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education. There may have been several reasons for this design choice, including that AMI training centers are generally expected to ensure as much consistency as possible from one center to another. In this vein, Bass-

Barlow describes an "emphasis on maintaining AMI training as a prescriptive training model which conforms to Maria Montessori's original methodology" (p. 111). Other potential reasons for this design choice could have been related to researcher access or a desire to contribute specifically to the future of AMI training centers or schools. Similarly, Bass-Barlow also does not specify a focus on a particular level of AMI training, though some participants are identified as having completed Elementary level preparation (for children ages 6 to 12) and some as having completed Primary level preparation (for children ages 3 to 6). So while Bass-Barlow does not claim generalizability of findings, hopefully future research will help unpack the lived experiences of teachers (and especially teachers of color) who have experienced trainings across the various levels, and/or whose training occurred through other (non-AMI) organizations. Bass-Barlow offers several recommendations for the directions of future research, a need illuminated by her work, yet this study's findings merit significant attention in the field of Montessori teacher education.

D'Cruz Ramos, G. O. (2023). *Critical Montessori education: Centering BIPOC Montessori educators and their anti-racist teaching practices* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland]. <http://hdl.handle.net/1903/30199>

In this dissertation, Genevieve O. D'Cruz Ramos used a critical ethnographic lens to examine how one Black Montessori educator implemented the Montessori method in her classroom at a public Montessori charter school. The study focused on how the educator, who was assigned the pseudonym Lauren, critically and intentionally incorporated culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) in her practices and classroom: "Because of the lack of explicit centering of race in Montessori, Montessori spaces, culturally, are not always spaces inclusive of BIPOC educators and students and require active work to become inclusive spaces" (p. 52).

D'Cruz Ramos's study was guided by three research questions:

1. "How does a Black Montessori teacher interpret the Montessori philosophy to more relevantly support her BIPOC students?"
2. "How does she practice the Montessori method through culturally relevant and sustaining practices?"

3. “What are the structural barriers that continue to challenge her as a Black educator doing her work?” (pp. 13–14).

Additionally, a “Critical Montessori Model” (CMM)—grounded in critical race theory (CRT)—is proposed and defined by the author (p. 117). The core of this model is an assumption that “the Montessori method must be practiced with a critical racial understanding and implementation of the Montessori method, with an overarching framework of [CRT]” (p. 117). Further, CMM incorporates community cultural wealth (CCW) “to support BIPOC Montessori students’ and educators’ racial identities, the use of CSP to value student knowledge and their racial identities, and the specific emphasis on counter-storytelling for valuing student knowledge and BIPOC Montessori educators’ voices” (p. 117). The author asserts that the purpose of CMM is “to offer a critical lens specifically for BIPOC Montessori educators and students” (p. 117) and this model informed her interpretation of the ethnographic data captured.

The study itself relied on data captured through ethnographic interviews with and observations of Lauren, a Black Montessori educator at a public Montessori charter school. This data was collected, reviewed, coded, and analyzed to assess to what extent Lauren’s practices and classroom environment coalesced or aligned with, or even challenged CMM. In D’Cruz Ramos’s words, “overall, the [CMM] allowed me to identify particular aspects of Lauren’s classroom practice and space that centered the voices and experiences of BIPOC educators and students” (p. 120).

In the literature review, D’Cruz Ramos spotlights the lack of literature that centers the voices of BIPOC Montessori educators and students. While D’Cruz Ramos was able to identify sufficient literature to inform the study’s assumptions, she also acknowledged the dearth of studies pertaining to the experiences of BIPOC Montessori educators and students. As a result, it is worth mentioning some recent works and studies that are adjacent: Canzoneri-Golden & King, 2020, 2023; Cooper, 2022; Moquino, 2023; Moquino et al., 2023; Welch, 2023.

D’Cruz Ramos used ethnographic research methods and, as such, the sample size was small—one individual—which limits the generalizability of this study. Regardless, the results and insights that D’Cruz Ramos identified are valuable for both practitioners and researchers. She documented the experiences and practices of one public

Montessori educator, and in doing so, she provided a model for other Montessori educators to adopt or adapt.

What struck us most about D’Cruz Ramos’s study was the novel establishment of the CMM and the ethnographic examination of a BIPOC Montessori educator’s practices (including her preparation of the learning environment). The CMM provides other researchers and practitioners with tangible, articulate, and structured guidelines for implementing the Montessori method in a way that respects, acknowledges, and honors the lived experiences of BIPOC Montessori educators and students. Furthermore, the CMM is also relevant to educators’ practices across different pedagogical models as it demonstrates how CRT, CRP, and CSP can be incorporated into pedagogical practices. Simultaneously, the ethnographic research conducted by D’Cruz Ramos demonstrates one way that the CMM is implemented by a Black Montessori educator. We encourage practitioners and scholars alike to consult this dissertation for themselves to obtain a more intimate understanding of D’Cruz Ramos’s study and findings, including the extensive appendices; fortunately, this dissertation is readily accessible.

Hammons, M. S. (2023). *Antiracist pedagogy in White spaces: An exploration of antiracist White teachers and their commitment to create antiracist classrooms* [Doctoral dissertation, San Francisco State University]. <https://doi.org/10.46569/8p58pm94q>

Michelle S. Hammons began her qualitative exploration of anti-racist teaching by White Montessori teachers by acknowledging her own positionality. She is White and an experienced Montessori teacher from California who grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, with parents who created a multicultural, multiethnic environment for their family. After her years of working to create anti-racist spaces in schools, she shifted her focus to how other White teachers create anti-racist spaces, especially when they teach a majority of White students.

Hammons pointed out that the educational system in the United States displays and perpetuates many aspects of racism and White supremacy. White children attend schools where everyone looks like them and they have few opportunities to connect with children who look different. In 2021, over 78% of White elementary and secondary public school students across the United States attended a school that was at least half White, even though fewer than half of public school students in the

United States are White (Schaeffer, 2021).

Hammons referenced James Baldwin's statement about how racism is the problem of the White community and that nothing will change until the White community engages with the problem. With that backdrop, she pointed out that while there has been work on how White school leaders successfully create anti-racist schools, there has been little work done on how White teachers successfully practice anti-racist teaching.

For her dissertation research, Hammons did not intend to focus on Montessori educators initially, but upon reflection, she realized that there were three key reasons Montessori pedagogy was well-suited to her focus on anti-racism: (a) the focus on peace education, (b) the opportunities that teachers have to incorporate alternative narratives, and (c) the focus on the education of the whole child. Hammons's research questions were: "How do White teachers committed to antiracism develop their personal antiracist stance? How do White teachers who are committed to antiracist practice manifest that practice in their classroom? What impact do White antiracist teachers hope to have on students?"

She sought out White, public Montessori Elementary teachers who taught in schools where at least 40% of the students were White and no other group made up more than 20% of the school population. From across the United States, she was able to secure four participants who met the criteria. With these teachers, she conducted two focus groups with all four participants and three semi-structured interviews with two of the participants, each lasting less than one hour.

From the data she collected in the interviews and focus groups, Hammons reported on how her participants developed their anti-racist stance from being aware of White supremacy culture, doing formal work through their schools, and personally reflecting on their own biases and privilege. They expressed their commitment to not turn a blind eye to injustices that do not affect them personally.

When asked how this anti-racist work manifested in their classrooms, the participants' responses revealed three themes: intentionality, curriculum, and disrupting White supremacy culture. Teachers were intentional with their choices to bring diverse materials into the classroom and have difficult conversations with their students. The second way that their anti-racist stance manifested in the classroom was through their approach to the curriculum by updating the materials to avoid racist and colonial messages. The third way that the participants' anti-racist approach was carried out in their teaching was through

the ways that they disrupted White supremacy culture by both resisting perpetuation of White supremacy and fear of conflict.

Related to Hammons's last research question, she found that her participant teachers hoped to help their predominantly White students expand their viewpoints by striving toward a classroom that decentered whiteness.

Based on her data, Hammons offered suggestions to encourage future anti-racist Montessori teachers. First, she argued that all Montessori training programs need to include antibias and anti-racist training to help their candidates understand the world in which they will be working. Second, she suggested that school leaders need to create transformative change to encourage and support this work. Last, Hammons suggested that there should be better ways both to connect White anti-racist educators to support one another and to find ways for these White educators to connect with groups of diverse, minoritized people.

Regarding limitations, Hammons acknowledged that this dissertation should not be considered a definitive account of White anti-racist teachers. This is a snapshot of four teachers, from their own statements and participation. Classrooms were not visited, and observations were not conducted. Throughout the dissertation, both Hammons and her participants also acknowledged that this work is not learned in one training session. They also freely acknowledged that this work is never finished. There are always new teachable moments in the classroom and new students who need the lessons.

Hammons suggested future research examining ways to involve school leaders in ABAR work, as well as longitudinal studies examining ABAR classrooms. She also suggested that studying the students in anti-racist classrooms would provide a fruitful direction for research.

Hammons detailed how four White teachers have worked—and continue to work—toward more equitable spaces for all students. Her accessible dissertation shares the voices of these teachers, uplifting their efforts and acknowledging that, for those who choose to see the uncomfortable truths, the work to be anti-racist is never done.

Author Information

† Corresponding Author

Joel Parham † is an independent researcher with JRP Consulting & Research and an affiliate researcher at the University of Kansas. He can be reached at joel@jrpconsultingresearch.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5636-0879>

Jennifer D. Moss is assistant professor of psychology at Emporia State University. She can be reached at jmoss3@emporia.edu.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9207-0043>

Katie Keller Wood is the executive director of CMStep, the Cincinnati Montessori Secondary Teacher Education Program. She can be reached at katie@cmstep.com.

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Appendix: List of 2023 Dissertations Considered

- Allen-Blevins, E. H. (2023). *Public Montessori early childhood educators' perceptions of psychological needs fulfillment* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2827944915>
- Ansong, K. D. (2023). *An interpretative phenomenological analysis of lived experiences of graduate-level peace educators: Voices for sustained peace* [Doctoral dissertation, Nova Southeastern University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2910128900>
- August, A. M. (2023). *A theological analysis of the educational method of Maria Montessori using an inverse consistency protocol* [Doctoral dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2911078211>
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