



# Montessori Identity in Dialogue: A Selected Review of Literature on Teacher Identity

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**Abstract:** Montessori teacher education includes an intensive and ongoing teacher transformation. This experience aids in the development of a clearly defined teacher identity. Research on teacher identity broadly has shown that while such an identity can offer guidance and support, it can also limit teachers and prevent them from exploring other strategies that may support them and, in turn, their students (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Britzman, 2003; Sumsion, 2002). This effect is problematic when teachers face moments of uncertainty and dilemmas in their teaching practice. As Montessori classrooms become increasingly diverse, teachers may need to adopt identities that are not explicitly defined in Montessori teacher transformation. This review of literature examines components of a Montessori teacher identity and, broadly, the effects of teacher identity as well as elements of antibias and antiracist teacher-identity development that includes inner reflection and an activist approach to teaching.

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An experience of transformation is a recurrent theme in describing and promoting Montessori teacher training. Transformative experiences have both epistemic (i.e., knowledge construction) and personal (i.e., preferences and desires) dimensions (Barnes, 2015). The epistemic dimension unveils new knowledge that was previously unavailable to or unknown by the individual before the transformative experience occurred. This dimension is exemplified in the following statement by a preservice teacher as part of an Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) teacher training program: “And I just thought, this is what education could be. And at that point, I realized that, okay, this is something that I didn’t even know education could be. I’ve never seen anything

like this” (Montessori School of Beaverton, 2011). The personal dimension of a transformative experience affects an individual’s subjective preferences and transforms the self, altering their<sup>1</sup> identity. A personal transformation reorganizes how a person thinks by affecting beliefs, attitudes, personal traits, and even emotions; it is an experience that reshapes one’s priorities, preferences, and identity (Barnes, 2015). While Montessori teacher training includes an epistemic transformation, the personal transformation is perhaps more powerful. In texts read today by Montessori preservice and active

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<sup>1</sup> The singular “they” is used throughout this paper, in alignment with an antibias perspective on gender identity.

teachers, Maria Montessori included instructions for how a teacher should look and act in the classroom (Montessori, 1967). Further, she identified specific moral character traits, beliefs, and values she felt all teachers must acquire (Montessori, 1936/2005). These explicit directives unique to the Montessori Method have a significant effect on teacher transformation and subsequent identity.

The transformative experience of becoming a teacher is not unique to the Montessori world; teachers frequently describe the process of becoming teachers as one of personal transformation (e.g., Alsup, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Friesen & Besley, 2013). Friesen and Besley (2013) argued that “learning to *be* a teacher is as important as learning *how* to teach” (p. 23, emphasis in original). A prescribed teacher identity can be both helpful and problematic when teachers face challenging situations, teaching dilemmas, and uncertainty in the classroom and in the school (Cuban, 1992; Lampert, 1985). While teacher identity can offer comfort and resources to successfully tackle those moments, it can also become restrictive and isolating when one is unable to fulfill what often feels like required ways of being. Gee (2014) wrote, “to enact identities people have to talk the right talk, walk the right walk, behave as if they believe and value the right things, and wear the right things at the right time and place” (p. 24). What happens when talk becomes a controversial discussion? Or when the walk veers or swerves? When self-identity is closely intertwined with, or even reliant, on a clearly defined and inflexible social identity, moments of uncertainty can be unsettling and deeply emotional. Yet, while classroom demographics change and student needs shift and evolve, a teacher should be able to perform in a way that serves both their own and their students’ needs in creative and effective ways. Therefore, it is critical that teacher identity be allowed to shift and evolve rather than remain stable and static (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2005; Flores & Day, 2006; Hermans, 2001).

Early Childhood Montessori teachers today need to be prepared for challenges that may not have been directly addressed in their Montessori transformation and at times may require teaching skills and strategies that differ from or even contradict Dr. Montessori’s original directions (Christensen, 2019; Loeffler, 2000). Implicit

biases about student behavior and lifestyle, among other social markers of difference, are often harbored deep within both a social and a personal identity and can affect a teacher’s self-conceptions and social perceptions, as well as the experiences of the students whom they teach. For example, Brown and Steele (2015) examined the relationship between suspension rates and race in Montessori and non-Montessori schools. While Montessori schools suspended students less, on average, than non-Montessori schools did, Brown and Steele’s research still showed racial disproportionality: Black Montessori students were three times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts were. Research (Brown & Steele, 2015; Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Schic, 2016) also has shown that teachers need to become aware of their own implicit biases so that they may work to avoid committing micro- and macroaggressions, as well as address such instances that occur in schools. Critical self-reflection with a social justice lens is essential for teachers today (Ausdale & Feagin, 2002; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Jewell, 2018; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Kissinger, 2017). Teachers should examine their own biases, the socialization of others with whom they work, and even the curriculum they follow.

This review of literature examines Dr. Montessori’s description of teacher identity, current research on teacher identity, and antibias/antiracist (ABAR) teacher-identity development. ABAR teaching practices and terminology apply to early childhood education (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Kissinger, 2017). However, Montessori-identity and teacher-identity research spans all ages, and much of the literature reviewed can apply broadly. Research on teacher identity writ large is voluminous, and this review only skims the surface of literature on the topic. The intent here is to provide sufficient background to call attention to the existence and complexity of teacher identity and its development as it relates to Montessori education. The purpose of this review is twofold: first, to explore literature on teacher identity, its development, and the ways in which identity can affect teacher experiences, and second, to encourage an intentional, ongoing dialogue between Montessori-identity and ABAR teacher-identity development practices.

## Montessori Teacher Identity

Dr. Montessori saw a need for an important personal transformation to effectively enact her Method of teaching. This spiritual preparation (Montessori, 1967/1972b), also referred to as the preparation of the adult, continues to be a central part of Montessori teacher training and establishes a clearly articulated description of who a Montessori teacher should be. In general, research has shown that many teachers feel a need to successfully and impeccably embody an ideological teacher identity (e.g., Britzman, 2003; Cuban, 1992; Green, 2015; Sumsion, 2002). This mindset also holds true for Montessori teachers specifically (Christensen, 2016; Malm, 2004). Exhibiting behaviors and knowledge of the Montessori Method is necessary to self-identify as a Montessori teacher and to be seen as such by others (Gee, 2014). Malm (2004) noted this commitment when studying the biographies of a group of Montessori teachers:

*Being able to call oneself a Montessori teacher and representing “Montessori education” is an essential aspect related to these teachers’ professional identity.... There is thus among these teachers a strong sense of commitment and responsibility, an evident awareness of the convictions they hold as Montessori teachers. They share a common philosophical approach to how they believe an essential Montessori teacher should be. (p. 404)*

Montessori teacher education includes a transformation of age-old beliefs, assumptions, and judgments about children and their role in society. The next section outlines specific components of the Montessori teacher identity that Dr. Montessori meticulously identified and described years ago and that continue to play a central role in Montessori teacher identity today.

### Virtuous and Moral

Along with Dr. Montessori’s new Method of education came characteristics of “the new teacher” (Standing, 1957, p. 297), one who possessed esteemed virtues, physical grace, and unwavering passion for the work. Spiritual preparation assists in the development of many practical abilities that are essential to fostering a quality Montessori classroom environment, such as skills in observation, formative assessment, and refined movement; it also includes a process of critical self-reflection.

According to Dr. Montessori, pride and anger are human defects rampant in adult interactions and relationships, instigating conflict, greed, and even war (Standing, 1957). These defects not only inhibit Dr. Montessori’s vision of peace through education but also negatively influence human development. Therefore, she emphasized the critical role of modeling and nurturing the development of characteristics such as joy, confidence, cooperation, and independence. To this end, pride and anger must be replaced with what she identified as opposite virtues: humility and patience (Montessori, 1936/2005). Dr. Montessori believed it took humility to identify and abandon preconceived notions about children’s development and behavior; patience, she explained, was necessary to slow down, see, and appreciate developmental possibilities and to search for ways to best support that growth (Montessori, 1936/2005).

### Observing, Reflecting, and Guiding

Observation is perhaps one of the most crucial abilities of the Montessori teacher. First, to truly see and understand children, an adult must commit to many hours of careful and thoughtful observation of children before beginning a career in teaching. While teachers work in the classroom, observation can strengthen and deepen this understanding as well as assess children’s learning and behavior, the needs of the classroom community, and characteristics of the physical environment (Montessori, 2016/1921).

Critical self-reflection also includes observation practices. Dr. Montessori believed that the majority of young children’s challenging behavior evolved out of misunderstandings, miscommunication, and their unique, unmet developmental needs. She argued that observation combined with self-reflection can help teachers identify those needs, explore the ways in which adult behavior or beliefs may inhibit development, and brainstorm what can be done within the curriculum to better serve the child (Montessori, 1967, 1946/1991, 1967/1972b, 1936/2005). Additionally, the role of the Montessori teacher is grounded in the belief that, when children are given a supportive environment equipped with the necessary tools, they need guidance more than direct instruction as they grow and develop. Therefore, embodying what it means to guide learning and development, rather than direct instruction is fundamental to becoming a Montessori teacher.

### Physical Grace

Dr. Montessori saw the act of guiding, rather than directing, as not only a vital mindset and way of teaching but also as a physical change that includes movement and even appearance. The Montessori teacher should “be attractive, pleasing in appearance, tidy and clean, calm and dignified” (Montessori, 1967, p. 277). *Analysis of movement*, a way of moving gracefully and intentionally, is an important concept introduced in Montessori teacher training and embedded in the curriculum. Analysis of movement refers in part to general movement and physical presence in the classroom (e.g., moving through the room quietly and calmly) and relates to the handling and presenting of materials and lessons to children (e.g., with purposeful and deliberate movements, limited and careful word choice; Montessori, 1946/1991). Dr. Montessori’s explicit directives for how a teacher should look and act are particularly important when conceptualizing the impact of teacher identity. Becoming and being a Montessori teacher includes an epistemic and personal transformation, as well as a physical transformation that governs how one appears and acts (Barker, 2012; Gee, 2014).

### Montessorian

The Montessori teacher is deeply trained in developmental theory, the history of the Method, and the intention of the materials, and, of course, in how to share them with children. Yet what makes the Montessori training unique is the significant attention to teacher inner preparation, transforming the adult’s ways of thinking and acting. In a study on Montessori teachers’ professional identities, Malm (2004) found that “among Montessori teachers, commitment is not only related to being a teacher, but to being a ‘Montessori’ teacher, i.e., identifying with/being aware of/adhering to specific educational philosophical principles” (p. 403). This identity is so powerful that many Montessori teachers not only denote their teacher identity specifically with Montessori education but simply use the term *Montessorian*.

A social identity comes equipped with other people’s expectations and opinions of our own behavior, knowledge, and beliefs. While such expectations can certainly be important in maintaining order, quality, and goals, they can also be harmful and cause negative reactions such as insecurity, guilt, and stress. Such explicit teacher qualities have the potential to evolve into

a seemingly inflexible social identity that may prevent Montessori teachers from exploring and accepting other ways of being in a classroom.

## Literature on Teacher Identity

This section provides information on current theories and research on teacher identity broadly. Understanding the ways in which teacher identity has been conceptualized at both a social and an individual level offers important insight into how identity affects the teacher experience.

### Born or Made

In her bestselling book, *Building a Better Teacher*, Elizabeth Green (2015) began her historical exploration of research on teaching and teacher education by challenging the common narrative of teachers as naturally born, a narrative she referred to as the “myth of the natural-born teacher” (p. 6). Teacher identity has been viewed as possessing particular character traits that some are born with and others are not. Green argued that this is a misguided conception of becoming and being a teacher and focused her book on if and in what way individuals can be taught how to teach. Britzman (2003) also discussed cultural myths that sustain and reproduce the notion of essential teacher qualities—qualities necessary to not simply teach, but to be seen and accepted as a teacher. Such narratives, or myths, have created a general social identity of what it is to be a true teacher, an identity that Green (2015) suggested relies on the belief in natural personality and character traits. Similarly, Britzman (2003) wrote, “through these myths, [people] recognize themselves as a teacher or feel as if they do not possess what it takes to become one” (p. 223). If teaching is thought to be an ability that individuals are born with, what happens to their identity when that ability is called into question?

Sumsion (2002) followed the career path of an enthusiastic early childhood teacher, a young woman who described her interest in teaching as a lifelong dream, a dream she was born with. As her teaching career progressed, she faced increasingly difficult situations that challenged her professionally and personally. Being a teacher had woven together her self-identity, social identity, and professional identity so tightly that the uncertainty and dilemmas she faced in her teaching practice inhibited the fulfillment of her lifelong dream and achieving her professional goals.

Concluding her report, Sumsion (2002) posed questions concerning the progress of early-childhood teacher education, several of which focus on what teacher educators should consider regarding teacher positionality, emotional preparedness, agency, and self. When overarching teacher-identity discourse revolves around the belief that teaching is an innate, natural ability possessed by certain individuals, teachers who experience moments that question those natural abilities may lack the emotional resilience necessary to overcome such a situation.

### Dialogic Identity

While the natural-born-teacher discourse continues to influence some notions of teacher identity, literature on alternative theories frequently conceptualize teacher identity as *dialogic*, meaning an individual's ability to take on multiple identity positions in relation to various social contexts (Hermans, 2001). Hermans (2001) conceived identity as multivoiced and not merely about identifying outwardly as one type of person or another (e.g., "At home, I am a mother; in the classroom, I am a teacher."). Instead, people have an unconscious ability to "construe another person or being as a position that [they] can occupy and as a position that creates an alternative perspective on the world and [themselves]" (p. 250). Because of this constant shift in perspective, identity positions can disagree, oppose, contradict, question, and judge one another.

Hermans (2001) noted the importance of both space and time in dialogic identity development. Which identity position is taken up and how an individual responds depend in part on the present social context, previous experiences, and cultural and social motivations (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Hermans, 2001). These variables are further complicated by the dialogic relationships among multiple identity positions, some of which may interpret and respond to a situation in different ways. Additionally, because identity is affected by and relates to the diverse social contexts it encounters, the available positions will expand and construct over time and space. In this view, identity is not fixed and stable, but rather it shifts and evolves as individuals move through the world: identity is continually constructed and deconstructed (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Flores & Day, 2006; Geijsel & Meijers, 2005).

In contrast to the myth of the natural-born teacher, viewing identity as dialogic and ever changing acknowledges the effects of the social and cultural contexts on individual growth through time. When teacher identity is viewed as ongoing construction, the ability to learn to be a teacher is more possible. An individual may acquire a teacher-positioned identity through social relations, such as teacher education, by being part of a teacher professional community and, of course, as a member of a classroom environment (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

### Identity and Self-Conception

A plethora of philosophical, theoretical, and research-based literature exists around notions of identity, self, and voice (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987/2008; Miller, 1994; Palmer, 1998/2007). In this literature review, *identity* refers to all these elements. However, it is important to recognize the self, particularly self-conception, in a discussion of teacher transformation and teacher identity.

While identity can be viewed as dialogic and in a continual state of construction, many (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Geijsel & Meijers, 2005) still include self-identification as a part of that construction process. In their review of literature on teacher-identity formation, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) expressed a common opinion that self-understanding is an important aspect of teacher-identity development. Geijsel and Meijers (2005) argued that learning to be a teacher is not only "a process of social construction, but also one of individual sense-making" (p. 420). They described identity construction as circular, where experience and self-understanding work closely together. As individuals encounter new situations, they must work through their own multiple interpretations and understandings of that experience and respond in their own unique way.

Self-reflection can aid in this sense-making process. When teachers engage in self-reflection, they gain a fuller understanding of how their teacher self fits into larger social contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009); this understanding can strengthen their self-identity. Palmer (1998/2007) attributed his own ability to teach not to purely pedagogical knowledge, but to "the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood" (p. 10). Cardelle-Elawar and Lizzarraga (2010) found that teachers

who became aware of their multiple roles as a teacher through self-reflection and self-assessment sought ways to be more effective with their diverse students. They surmised that teachers who had a greater self-awareness know “who they are and who they want to become” (p. 207), leading to more intentional teaching choices that enhanced their skills and effectiveness in the profession. Hamman, Gosselin, Romano, and Bunuan (2010) took this self-awareness a step further by asking preservice and novice teachers to identify their possible teacher selves. This future-oriented practice helps teacher educators understand which content is effective and meaningful while also helping teachers develop a goal based on their dialogic identity as a teacher (Hamman et al., 2010). Becoming a teacher is not something that happens to an individual; instead, it is a transformation that is in part self-constructed.

### Identity and Emotion

Barker (2012) eloquently explained that “identity involves an emotional attachment to the narratives of our lives” (p. 136). He said self-identity comprises self-conceptions and their related emotional identifications. Thus, emotions arise out of how an identity interprets and reacts to lived experiences, and these reactions between identities can be contradictory. As previously discussed, a dialogic identity is made up of potentially conflicting positions and perspectives. A teacher may face discrepancies between different identity positions, causing emotional uneasiness and vulnerability (Hermans, 2001). As teachers work to interpret, understand, and incorporate a social experience into their own identity and its corresponding social expression, they may encounter situations that challenge their self-concept and cause emotional contradictions (Britzman, 2003).

Challenges between identity and social contexts have been referred to as *boundary experiences*. Geijsel and Meijers (2005) defined a boundary experience as a situation “when a person, trying to participate more fully (centrally) in a social practice, encounters a situation in which one is *unable to function adequately because one cannot fully identify with the new situation and its exigencies*” (p. 424, emphasis in original). Sumsion (2002) depicted the emotional breakdown of a dedicated early-childhood teacher who faced demands that she could not relate to, navigate through, or emotionally handle. The boundary

experience was emotionally draining and affected both her ability to do her job and her identity as a teacher.

Flores and Day (2006) noted the “emotional labor” (p. 221) required of teachers on a daily basis, such as having to perform social niceties regardless of inner feelings (e.g., responding politely to parents, even when frustrated) or emotionally coping with the many diverse challenges in a classroom and school community. This tension can become emotionally exhausting. Creating and sustaining parent–teacher relationships, practicing culturally relevant pedagogy, navigating school rules and regulations, and even representing the school for promotion and marketing purposes are just some of the additional demands placed on educators today. These additional tasks may create instances of ideational conflicts, in other words, when one social identity diverges from another (Cuban, 1992; Helsing, 2007; Sumsion, 2002). Adapting and conforming to a teacher identity can be particularly difficult for new teachers facing unfamiliar professional expectations and challenges (Hamman et al., 2010). These conflicts can be referred to as *dilemmas*, meaning “conflict-filled situations that require choices because competing, highly prized values cannot be satisfied” (Cuban, 1992, p. 6). The personal nature of dilemmas can cause uncertainty in a teacher’s practice, arising from a variety of educational beliefs and expectations, as well as from the complex social and emotional requirements of teaching (Helsing, 2007; Lampert, 1985). This uncertainty can affect one’s teaching practice and even self-identity by instigating emotions and questioning one’s self-conceptions. Palmer (1998/2007) wrote eloquently on the vulnerability of being a teacher: “to reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves” (p. 18), a reaction that is detrimental to both teachers and students.

Britzman (2003) analyzed the experience of two teachers caught between two different teacher identities, one depicting teaching as authoritarian and the other as flexible and creative. Faced with this discrepancy, the teachers felt unbearable pressure, and even helplessness, to choose and perform as if teaching were a single, stable identity. Had they been supported in acknowledging the existence of multiple identities, they could have explored “their own contradictory selves in ways that could work

through such a dualist identity in order to consider the multiple choices that contradictions offer” (p. 226).

The stable identity sought is frequently an image of an ideal teacher, maintained by cultural myths or prescribed ways of being. This idealistic expectation, of what and who a good teacher is, may generate feelings of hopelessness and discouragement in teachers when discrepancies and boundary experiences that challenge that ideology occur (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Flores & Day, 2006). Giving teachers a single, ideal identity to strive for sets the stage for identity conflicts, discrepancies, and boundary experiences derived from unattainable or frequently challenged ideological expectations.

### **Societal Conceptions of Teacher Identity**

The teacher identity can be both helpful and problematic when educators face challenging situations, teaching dilemmas, and uncertainty in their classrooms and schools. While their identity can offer comfort and resources to successfully tackle those moments, it can also become restrictive and isolating when they are unable to fulfill ways of being that often feel required (Gee, 2014).

As Sumsion (2002) described in her research, the pressure to fulfill the image of an ideal teacher can be challenging and even impossible; it can also lead to self-doubt, insecurity, and disenchantment with the profession. However, fostering dialogic identity development is not solely the job of the individual or even of the teacher education program; the societal conception of being a teacher must also expand. The myth of the natural-born teacher still exists today, contributing to the larger social pressures of what and who an ideal and true teacher is. Perhaps a better understanding of what it means to teach and respect for the complexities of the profession—including that of early childhood education—will encourage a societal shift in mindset. Becoming and being a teacher requires sustained flexibility and support, not just defined standards and essential expectations. Such a shift may also be necessary in the Montessori world.

### **Antibias/Antiracist Teacher-Identity Development**

How teachers understand their self-identities and social identities and how they enact those identities is of

particular importance when taking up ABAR teaching strategies. From birth, children are developing a social understanding of their world and experiencing self-discovery. Teachers are not only responsible for fostering an awareness and appreciation of diversity through materials and lessons but also are important role models in all they do. However, truly and consistently modeling equitable and nonbiased behavior can be difficult. The early sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, developed the concept of *habitus*, meaning a “deeply structured cultural grammar for action” (Swartz, 1997, p. 102). *Habitus* refers to the ingrained socialization individuals experience as they grow and develop, reinforcing cultural norms and expectations of themselves and others. Such socialization includes the explicit and implicit privilege and oppression of varying social identities—a social hierarchy reinforced through actions, language, and other social experiences. Therefore, instances of bias, privilege, and oppression are often so deep-seated in social life that they occur unnoticed and unresolved. However, these conditions lay the foundation for a child’s developing understanding of their world and the *habitus* they experience.

Dr. Montessori viewed education as an essential component of achieving justice and peace, made possible through children (Montessori, 1972a). While it is vital that Montessori teachers create a safe and developmentally appropriate space for children to work together in community, their teacher identity includes the roles of observer and guide, not to interfere in the child’s self and social discoveries. In contrast, antibias education places significant responsibility on teachers to intervene during moments of explicit and implicit bias (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). To do this effectively and appropriately, teachers need to spend considerable time reflecting on their own socialization, considering biases that they may uphold and reproduce in the classroom. Raising awareness of implicit and explicit bias that manifests in teachers’ day-to-day actions is a crucial first step to becoming an ABAR teacher.

### **Bias in the Early Childhood Classroom**

A part of the Montessori Method of education includes an emphasis on continual and constructive teacher self-reflection, in part to develop skills in objective observation. A Montessori teacher should “prepare himself *inwardly*. He must examine himself methodically in order to discover certain definite

defects that may become obstacles in his relation with the child” (Montessori, 1936/2005, p. 107; italics in original). Regarding potential bias, prejudice, and assumptions, Dr. Montessori (1967) called on teachers to “free [themselves] from all preconceived ideas concerning the levels at which the children may be” (p. 276). However, eliminating implicit bias is arguably impossible. Swartz (1997) explained that “habitus derives from the predominantly unconscious internalization—particularly during early childhood—of objective chances that are common to members of a social class or status group” (p. 104). Teachers are no exception, having experienced bias as a socially normed practice in their own development. Such long-term, unconscious internalization can be difficult to identify and acknowledge, much less overcome and cast aside. While ABAR teaching approaches generally prioritize the recognition and critical exploration of personal prejudice and bias (Derman-Sparks, 2008; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Kissinger, 2017), they also emphasize exploring the ways in which teachers’ own identities have evolved and interact with those of the children in their classrooms. Furthermore, ABAR teaching practices encourage the acknowledgment of social identities such as race and social class among students and teachers, as well as ongoing reflection on how those identities affect individual experience and group dynamics (e.g., Derman-Sparks, 2008; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Kissinger, 2017; Kumashiro, 2002).

Research (e.g., Gilliam et al., 2016) has suggested that it is not possible for teachers to be objective in their work with children; this reality is manifest in a variety of ways. A recent study of early childhood teachers’ implicit bias, by Gilliam et al. (2016), revealed that teachers not only were more likely to describe a boy’s behavior as challenging or requiring attention than a girl’s but also were more likely to spend their time watching boys for challenging behavior. Specifically, teachers looked at Black boys more frequently than at any other children. One of the deeply concerning results of this implicit bias is that, at the time of this study, 47% of U.S. preschoolers suspended one or more times were Black boys (Gilliam, et al., 2016). Additionally, a subtle response, like eye movement focused on a specific population, can have a detrimental effect on the development of all children’s social understanding. Included as one of the five principles of social-class-sensitive pedagogy, Jones and Vagle (2013)

have called for teachers to examine and be aware of their body language when working with students. They wrote,

*A raised eyebrow, a widening of the eyes, a turning of the back can all be perceived as performances for harsh judgment or dismissiveness. We might use our bodies this way without awareness, thus inflicting injury without intention and moving on to the next encounter similarly—or behave in a class-sensitive way in the very next interaction. (p. 6)*

It is crucial to remember that all adult behavior in the classroom setting is modeled to children learning about their world. Ongoing reflection on personal bias expressed through body language is an important part of being an ABAR teacher. Identity is constantly performed, maintained, and reproduced in verbal and nonverbal ways (Gee, 2014). Therefore, it is critical that teachers consider how their actions perpetuate, or dismantle, social identities that oppress some and privilege others.

### **ABAR Teacher Self-Reflection**

To combat implicit and explicit bias, many scholars (e.g., Ausdale & Feagin, 2002; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Goldstein, 2001; Hawkins, 2014; hooks, 2003; Husband, 2012; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Kemple, Harris, & Lee, 2015; Kissinger, 2017; Kumashiro, 2002) have argued that critical self-examination is a necessary first and ongoing step. Teachers must look inwardly to better understand their own identities, experiences, beliefs, and assumptions in relation to social biases. In their book on how racism develops in early childhood, Ausdale and Feagin (2002) outlined several ways for teachers to address acts of racial prejudice, the first being a call to critically reflect on “internalized negative constructions of the children with whom [teachers] interact” (p. 208). Similarly, Jones and Vagle (2013) believed that analyzing one’s personal experience in relation to social class was the first principle of practicing social-class-sensitive pedagogy. Husband (2012) argued that social injustice “exists and is furthered through the formal and informal ideologies, policies, practices, and texts implemented in schools” (p. 366). Husband encouraged those seeking ABAR education to reflect on and critique the systems and practices in which they participate, emphasizing the importance of becoming an active participant in dismantling bias and creating and enacting equitable ABAR teaching practices.

### **Self-Reflective Practices**

As previously mentioned, continual self-reflection is an important part of the Montessori Method and is introduced during teacher education. This practice aligns with several forms of ABAR teacher education. Kemple et al. (2015) outlined three useful activities to facilitate preservice teachers' awareness of bias and prejudice in education. All three activities focus on exploring an individual's own identity through reflection, small-group discussions, and carefully selected readings. The Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework (2014) includes identity development as the first step in helping students, of any age, to appreciate diversity and become social justice activists. Similarly, Kissinger (2017) shared two approaches to personal reflection as a first step to becoming an antibias and anti-oppression early childhood teacher. Both include reflective narratives, either by answering a series of questions about identity or by exploring gender, race, and culture using creative expression, such as poetry. Kissinger took this practice a step further by encouraging teachers to share their stories in small, safe groups: "I believe that sharing our stories is one of the important steps we must take in reclaiming our full humanity, beginning to heal, and taking action" (p. 11). Hooks (2003) also prescribed a process of reflective writing as a requirement for confronting racial bias and white-supremacist thinking, both in oneself and in society at large, and working to dismantle oppression. She too encouraged people to share their stories and subsequent awareness and understanding of race and racism: "We need to hear from the individuals who know, because they have lived anti-racist lives, what everyone can do to decolonize their minds, to maintain awareness, change behavior, and create beloved community" (p. 40).

### **Supporting ABAR Reflection**

Teachers should be supported in the exploration of their dialogic identity: what those identities are, how they came to be, and contexts that provoke them. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2006) wrote that "the anti-racism identity journey is fluid and more spiral than a ladder" (p. 21) and argued that identity and response to racism are greatly influenced by social contexts and the issues an individual experiences. When confronted by a situation that calls their antiracist identity into question, dilemmas, uncertainty, and challenging boundary experiences can arise. Therefore, teachers need the skills and freedom to

recognize their varied self-identities and social identities, and they should consider how their identities affect and support their teaching and their students. Social groups that expect individuals to embody one particular way of being a teacher may limit teachers' confidence and ability to adopt different teacher identities and corresponding strategies that may best serve their students.

### **Future Work and Dialogic Possibilities**

Teacher self-efficacy, agency, and retention are important topics associated with identity and its related emotional experiences. For this reason, much of the reviewed research on teacher identity calls for not only a change in the conceptualization of teacher identity but also the acknowledgment and support of its development during teacher education. Specifically, research on the dilemmas and uncertainty that Early Childhood Montessori teachers experience could help to identify both the challenges they face and how their Montessori identity may constrain or support them through such moments. It is crucial to note that many Montessori teachers are adopting ABAR practices in their classrooms. Research that explores their experiences, approaches, and methods, as well as their self-identification as teachers, would help Montessori scholars and teacher educators better understand how the potential dialogic identities are being adopted and how other teachers can be encouraged to follow suit. Finally, additional research examining the characteristics of a Montessori teacher identity today can help the transformational experience of becoming a Montessori teacher to evolve and adapt, perhaps expanding the performance expectations of being a Montessorian.

When identity is viewed as dialogic and as a process of continual construction, teachers have the space and support to explore their experiences as teachers and as socialized individuals. Expecting teachers, or any individual, to assume just one identity limits their ability to acknowledge, accept, and explore the possibilities created through multiple identities. Working in a classroom requires the ability to assume new perspectives and relate to different needs and abilities. While teaching requires flexibility, so too should society's understanding of a teacher's identity.

Incorporating ABAR teacher-identity development with Montessori teacher development is critical in today's society. There are growing factions of Montessori educators and scholars committed to putting this topic at the forefront of discussions of Montessori curriculum and teacher education (e.g., Branch, 2017; Han, 2018; Han & Moquino, 2018; Jewell, 2018; McCaffrey, 2017; Wafford & Rigaud, 2019). These conversations should also consider the effects of a single, stable notion of what a Montessori teacher looks and acts like, a social construct that may limit Early Childhood Montessori educators in their identity development and teaching practice. Becoming a Montessori teacher can be a profound and deeply personal transformation in which secrets are revealed and worldviews are altered. However, while both ABAR teacher reflection and Montessori pedagogy may bring a new, justice-oriented perspective, the terms are not synonymous. While both Montessori pedagogy and ABAR teacher development value self-reflection, ABAR practices stray from the idea that any teacher can become truly objective. Reflecting on verbal and nonverbal actions requires teachers to be able to adapt and evolve their teacher-identity performance to best support their students.

When identity is conceptualized as multifaceted and continuously self-constructing, teachers have the opportunity to recognize a dialogic identity, reflect on the experiences and contexts that have affected them, and become more aware of how those identities influence their practice. Combining the Montessori identity with ABAR's self-reflective tenets and practices can destabilize the clearly defined Montessori social identity. Such a dialogic wobble creates opportunities to consider new ideas, even ones that question former beliefs, and can lead to "classroom reform that otherwise might never happen" (Fecho et al., 2005, p. 180). Viewing Montessori identity as in dialogue with other ways of being a teacher allows for self-exploration, creativity, and innovation. It is from there that teaching practices can be critiqued, revised, and improved to truly liberate and build a peaceful society.

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