

## Montessori and the Black child: “Certainly, we must go”

By Ayize Sabater, Ed.D. (11/22, first printed in AMI/USA’s Fall eJournal, p. 3-8)

Blessed! As a Montessori leader, Montessori parent, and Montessori researcher (Sabater, 2019) I recently was blessed to trek out on my first voyage to #TheMotherLand of Africa (Lemonick, 1987; Tierney, Wright, Springen, 1988). This inspirational journey, which I’ll hope to write about at another time, compelled me to reflect upon Dr. Montessori’s pedagogy and Black children, particularly given Dr. Montessori’s interest in going to Africa. In fact, I must thank M. Nia Seale who shared with me that at the end of Dr. Montessori’s life, while on her death bed, her son Mario, says she had a “call to Africa” when she said “Certainly, we must go [to Africa]” (Montessori, 1965). It is my hope that this essay on Montessori and the Black child spurs more research into this subject given that Lillard, Taggart, Yonas, and Seale (2021) note that “we are limited by the fact that only a few studies include or disaggregate [by] Black children.”

Briefly, this is my *back of the napkin* reflection on three aspects of Montessori pedagogy which appear to align with the learning disposition of many Black children (Hale-Benson, 1987, x). To be clear, Montessori education can be an academic and overall life support to many children. In fact, several authorities have demonstrated some positive findings around how the Montessori approach fosters “children learning self-discipline and hard work independently of a teacher’s orders and ...[self-sufficiency] ...” while recent researchers have “found positive results for students living in low-income communities...though a few other studies found more mixed results” (Debs, 2019, pgs 51 and 12).



For this essay, as a Black father, I am intentionally focusing on the Black child. To be clear, I am not speaking about *all* Black children, and I recognize that some of these concepts might apply to children of other races and/or ethnicities. Additionally, it may be worth noting that this essay has been germinating in my mind, as I have often been asked by numerous Black parents and Black educators whether Montessori pedagogy is “a fit” for Black children or if there is data that demonstrates its efficacy. In fact, Debs (2019) discusses some Black families actually vehemently opposing Montessori being fully implemented in one school because many Black parents felt that it does not provide “highly structured” classrooms. Debs (2019) also notes that 46% of her interviewed Black and Latinx parents perceived that Montessori education did not provide “academic rigor” that might yield “outcomes such as graduating from college and getting a job” for their children (p. 112-3). With these Black parental concerns in mind, AMI primary consultant Dr. Myesha Green notes that her many years of experience have demonstrated that the Montessori “approach nurtures the [student’s] ability to navigate multicultural settings and self-advocate, builds collaboration skills, and helps [all] children develop strong problem-solving skills (understanding why and how)” as well as helps *all* students to “mature into strong, self-sufficient, independent thinkers who can succeed in the face of [many] challenging circumstances” (M. Green, personal communication, November 11, 2022).



From my limited experience, I perceive that the Montessori approach is a powerful learning construct (Debs, 2019; Swartz, 2022; etc.), for many, and several aspects appear well aligned with the learning of many Black children (Hale-Benson, 1987). In discussing the Black child, Hale-Benson (1987) departed from the pathology model (aka deficit-based model) in her search for developing a framework that valued the cultural heritage that Black children bring to the learning table. She posits an approach that centers the behavioral learning styles of Black children that incorporate: sensorimotor, linguistic,

kinesthetic, musical intelligence, interpersonal and logical-mathematical aspects of intelligence. Her framework relies upon the work of Howard Gardner, and this is what she describes as the learning style of Black children (Hale-Benson, 1987).

Before I begin, I would like to offer this brief Montessori overview from Swartz (2022) where he states that this educational approach was “[f]ounded in the early 20th century by the Italian physician and education iconoclast Maria Montessori, [with a] teaching method that bears her name [and] has taken root all over the United States and around the world.”

And a more detailed description from Murray, Casquejo-Johnston, Sabater, and Clark (2020) concerning the life of Dr. Montessori and the Montessori approach:

Maria Montessori was one of Italy’s first female physicians, and she developed a groundbreaking educational method based on astute observation of children’s behavior while working in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Rome (Gutek, 2004; Kramer, 1988). As someone who witnessed the extent of injustice experienced by poor women and children particularly, she turned from medicine to focus on education, seeing its potential power for social reform (Gutek, 2004) ... She was a woman before her time in suggesting that children learn through hands-on activity, that critical brain development occurs during the preschool years, and that children with disabilities could and should be educated (Montessori, 1912b) ... Montessori education is an individualized approach with a long-term perspective. Children remain with the same teacher in multiage classrooms for three years, allowing for continuity in the learning experience (Montessori, 1912b). In this environment, children work at their own pace with opportunities for cooperative learning while working in small, mixed-age groupings according to ability and interest (Montessori, 1912b; Montessori, 1972). Montessori programs typically limit the emphasis on whole group instruction, grades, and tests and instead focus on student-chosen work with specially designed materials during long blocks of uninterrupted time (Montessori, 1912b; Montessori, 1965a; Montessori, 1965b).

Now, given that we have explored the impressive life of Dr. Maria Montessori and the Montessori approach, as well as Hale Benson’s exploration of the learning style of Black children, I would humbly like to offer my reflections on the Montessori approach and the Black child. I’m

offering three brief observations of some Montessori components which appear in line with the learning styles of many Black children (Hale-Benson, 1987). Including, but not limited to, the following three aspects: self-initiative; independence; and, spirituality.

*Self-initiative* is something that I'm referring to where 'a child taps into some form of motivation to act upon something that interests that child.' Montessori's approach appears to truly be "child-centered" and calls for the educator to *follow the needs of the child*. Beyond the imperative to follow the child, which also supports independence, Montessori's approach focuses on helping children to help themselves (Stephenson, 2011, p. 38). This Montessori disposition seems to directly encourage a child's independence and self-initiative. In fact, Dr.



Montessori discussed a set of 'human tendencies' where children universally are said to possess one of those tendencies – to work and be active—which appears to underscore the importance of independence and self-initiative<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, Dr. Montessori advances, what I am calling, the concept of a child's "self-initiating drive," which similarly relates to self-initiative, when she states "the inner teacher, instead [of our conventional schooling process], does it [unfolding the child's natural learning] at the right time" (Montessori, 1949, p. 109). To allow the child, and in this case the Black child, to tap into their self-initiating drive appears to align with a core principle for many Black individuals and the USA's Black community at large. In fact, within Black American culture many observe the principle of self-initiative, which has a related specially celebrated day during the Black American holiday of Kwanzaa. The principle, which I'm referring to, is the principle of 'self-determination' or kujichagulia (which is Ki-Swahili for determination). For the Montessori approach to nurture, within children, the notion of pursuing something that interests them, appears to be fostering a child's self-initiative which I posit is inextricably connected to one's sense of self-determination. Dr. Carter G. Woodson, in discussing the importance of self-initiative says "[t]he mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making [one to] think and do for [oneself]" (Woodson, 1933/1998, p. x).

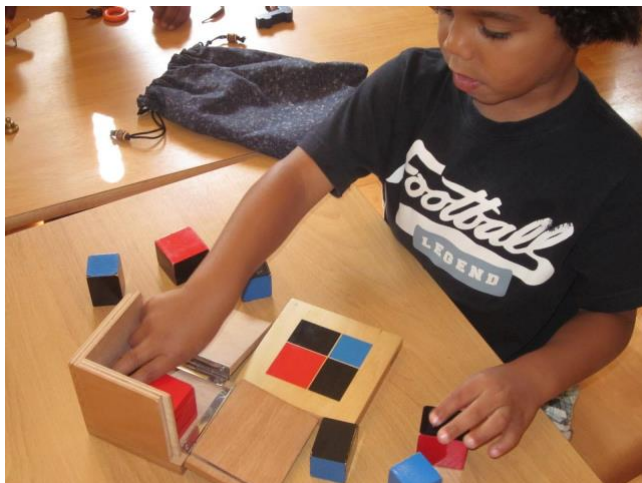
Next, given that I have intimated at independence, earlier in discussing self-initiative, I would now like to briefly mention how I see the Montessori approach as supporting a child's independence. Now for me *independence* is allowing 'a child the autonomy to think, speak and act based upon their own volition.' The Montessori imperative to follow the child inherently appears

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<sup>1</sup> Some may say that to focus on the individual Black child runs counter to the idea of the universal but I would offer a slightly more nuanced perspective. I believe that we do not have to make an "either/or" choice between the "individual/universal." Instead I would offer the "both/and" idea. I believe that one brings oneself more fully to humanity's grand banquet, after one fully understands their own & their people's "particular" history, culture and social contributions. The ancient Kemitians aka Egyptians had the mantra "know thyself" (Akbar, 1998, p. vi) and it would seem that for one to know their own gifts as well as the contributions of their people, then this awareness might allow that person to more fully contribute to humanity's grand banquet. This thereby allows one to transcend the dichotomous "either/or" construct, found in the "individual/universal," in exchange for the more expansive "both/and" disposition.



to provide a certain level of ‘freedom within limits’ for a child. Furthermore, Dr. Montessori also discussed another ‘human tendency’—to explore— which in order for one to explore, then they must be allowed the freedom or independence to explore. In many Montessori environments children are encouraged to freely choose work based upon that child’s own interest (or as guided by the teacher). Additionally, children are free to repeat working on something that interests them, for as often as they would like. Children are not arbitrarily told to move onto another concept based upon the dictates of a teacher because the “class is ready to move on” or because the “calendar” demands certain concepts to be covered at certain times in the school year. Children are provided structure and are not “free to run wild” but the child’s environment, the child’s teacher (or guide) and the routines, therein, provide the limits for the child. The Montessori approach harbors a belief that children are capable of solving problems for themselves and should be afforded the freedom to explore their solutions. In many parts of the USA, after the downfall of the wicked bondage system, many Black people could be heard reciting the mantra ‘education for liberation,’ which appears to suggest that utilizing education as a means to advance freedom, and in this case Black freedom or independence, is important to many Black people (Hilliard, 1997/1999, p. 124).



A final Montessori focal point which appears to align with the learning style of many Black children is that of *spirituality*. Now for me *spirituality*, as it relates to early childhood education, is acknowledging that ‘a child is a sacred creation of a heavenly Creator.’ I recall years ago, one of my fellow co-founding Board members of MSJ (Montessori for Social Justice) Amelia Sherwood, the visionary behind the Sankofa Learning Center, once told me that ‘[the] Montessori [approach] honors the child’ (A. Sherwood, personal communication, June 28, 2018) which appears in line with certain

aspects of many Indigenous people’s practices, including some Black communities (Hilliard, 1997/1999, p. xiii)<sup>2</sup>. In fact, Hilliard (1997/1999) points out that “we [educators]...must engage in a deep, profound and penetrating search, study, understanding and mastery of the illumination of the African spirit...[such that]...our work would serve to minimize/eliminate those forces designed

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, to Amelia’s point, I’ve realized that not only does the Montessori Approach “honor the child,” when it is practiced well, but moreover, Dr. Montessori *specifically designed a pedagogy for*, as theologian Thurman (1949) discusses, *the disinherited* and Dr. Montessori grounded her approach in the spiritual development of the child. In fact, Indigenous visionary elder, Dave Archambault, Sr, points out that Dr. Montessori discusses, at length, how the child is a spiritual embryo and Dave says that “Maria Montessori was just an absolute genius...and what’s so significant about Maria Montessori is that she developed an education system that allowed the child and that force [the spiritual embryo] to grow and be what it wanted to be...” and this practice of supporting one’s spiritual development may help as a trauma informed practice (Archambault, 2013). Another visionary Indigenous community builder, Trisha Moquino, has discussed how many Indigenous peoples have long had, for thousands of years, spiritual practices that focus upon the child’s spiritual development and Dr. Montessori’s approach appears well aligned (for more information on Amelia Sherwood’s African-centered work see - <https://sankofalearningcenter.org/author/sankofamontessori/> and for more information on Trisha Moquino’s Indigenous language reclamation work that uses the Montessori approach see - <https://kclcmontessori.org/>).

to dehumanize African people [by drawing on]...a source of energy and understanding that will ignite and enhance the spiritual..." (Hilliard, 1997/1999, p. xiii). Many Black communities, as well as Indigenous communities, believe that children are spiritual gifts from the Creator, who are close to the Creator's purity. AMI primary trainer Jennifer Shields notes that "the Montessori approach allows the guide/educator to bring their humanity to the child's formation. This is a spiritual and human process... (J. Shields, personal communication, October 5, 2022)." Continuing to discuss spirituality, Dr. Montessori states "we may say that a spiritual regeneration of [human]kind is clearly possible and that it is the child who can show us the way to this spiritual regeneration...[The child] tells us that...[we are]...capable of solving the social problems" (Montessori, 1934).

In conclusion, I hope that this brief reflection on three aspects of Montessori pedagogy which appear to align with the learning disposition of many Black children, inspires further investigation. As increasing numbers of Black families seek Montessori education for their children, it warrants rigorous exploration around how Black children perform therein. Just as Dr. Montessori may have envisioned how her innovative educational approach could be a benefit for Black children while she was on her death-bed, I hypothesize that Montessori education may harbor as much of a blessing for many of our Black children, just as I was recently blessed by my #MotherLand trip. So, let us "go" and bring the Montessori approach to as many Black children as possible.

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Archambault, D. (2013, November 6). *Indian school whisperer*. Webinar presented virtually for TEDxBurnsvilleED participants. (Retrieved from: [https://youtu.be/kqF1PH\\_1tbk](https://youtu.be/kqF1PH_1tbk) )

Clark, K. (2022, November 21). *Liberatory Montessori*. Webinar presented virtually for AMI/USA members and other participants.

Debs, M. (2019). *Diverse families, desirable schools: Public Montessori in the ear of school choice*. Harvard Education Press. Cambridge, MA.

Dr. Debs discusses the concept of "fit." She points out that "issues of race and class had a great deal to do with how different parents experienced the [Montessori] school, notably their sense of "fit." Some became "true believers" in the Montessori method. Others, while satisfied, appreciated the [Montessori] school for other reasons. And some experienced what I came to call a "conflicted fit," in which doubts and concerns remained unresolved (p. 84)."

Fleming, J. (1985). *Blacks in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hale-Benson, J. (1982/1987). *Black children: Their roots, culture, and learning styles*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

Janice Hale Benson's *Black Children* posits that there is a culturally specific learning process that aids many Black children. She cites the work of Fleming (1985) who demonstrates

how HBCUs (Historically Black colleges/universities) appear more effective at educating Black youth than many PWIs (Predominately White institutions) as an example of “a distinctive educational experience for Black children (p. xv).”

Hilliard, A. (1997/1999). *SBA: The reawakening of the African mind*. Makare Publishing Co. Gainesville, FL.

I have cited Dr. Hilliard in discussing freedom and spirituality, but it’s interest to note his reflections on the Montessori approach. In fact, Koren Clark, Montessori educator and Liberatory strategist, has often lifted up, including in a 11/22 webinar (see Clark citation above), that Dr. Hilliard’s work is something that we should examine further. In the abovementioned webinar, Koren cited Dr. Hilliard’s 1996 *NAMTA* article where he states “Montessori is a metaphor for humanity because it is a pedagogy that helps humans receive what they naturally need.”

Lemonick, M. (1987). Science: Everyone's Genealogical Mother: Biologists speculate that "Eve" lived in sub-Saharan Africa. *Time*.

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Montessori, M. (1965). My most unforgettable character. *Reader's Digest*, Vol 87, October, p. 148. Retrieved from: <https://montessori150.org/maria-montessori/mario-montessori-my-most-unforgettable-character> also listen to narrator Anthea Davidson-Jarrett, at 15:48 to end, reciting Mario’s recollection on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sGtthbiIY4>

On her death bed at the age of 81, Dr. Montessori’s son Mario, recounts her “call to Africa” saying “I told her that I had met an official of Ghana, which was soon to become independent and desperately needed schools. He wanted Mother and me to help teach the teachers. “If any children need help, it is those poor children of African countries,” Mother said. “Certainly, we must go (p. 148).”

Murray, A., Casquejo-Johnston, L., Sabater, A., & Clark, K. (2020). Hidden Black voices in the history of Montessori education. *American Educational History Journal (AEHJ)*, Vol 47, Number 2, 205 – 221. [Abstract link](#).

Sabater, A. (2019). No hidden figures: Black Montessori history. *Montessori Public*, Vol. 4, Fall, 1. [Link](#)

Stephenson, M. (2011). *The art of Montessori in the home: From birth to six years*. AMI/USA publishing. Rochester, NY.

Swartz, M. (2022). Maria Montessori Myth Busting. *Early Learning Nation*. (Retrieved from: <https://earlylearningnation.com/2022/09/maria-montessori-myth-busting/>)

On outcomes, please note that Swartz continues, in part 2 of his 3-part series, by quoting professor of psychology Dr. Angeline Lillard who “points to a large and growing body of research that supports the Montessori model... The data speak...[such as one study, that finds]...Montessori children fared better on measures of academic achievement, social understanding and mastery orientation, and they also reported relatively more liking of scholastic tasks. They also scored higher on executive function when they were 4.”

Tierney, J., Wright, L., & Springen, K. (1988, January). The Search for Adam and Eve. *Newsweek*, 111(2), 46-52. (Retrieved from: <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/540959>)

Thurman, H. (1949/1996). *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Beacon Press. Boston, MA.

Woodson, C. (1933/1998). *The mis-education of the Negro*. Africa World Press. Brenton, NJ.