Patchwork Practices: A Critical Review of the Montessori Public School Subject

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Abstract

In the wake of late twentieth century educational reforms like No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act, American public schools have become increasingly subjected to standardized accountability testing, which has made student success on standardized tests the primary criterion of federal funding for struggling schools. Billed as an equalizer of academic achievement, these standardizing measures have both overseen increasing "inequality" as well as deterioration in the breadth of educational curriculum as teachers are incentivized to 'teach to the test.' This thesis is a critical analysis of the Montessori method within this flattened, test-focused environment. Through an analysis of educational reform in the market-driven, neoliberal moment; a comparison between the educational philosophies of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Maria Montessori, and Thomas Jefferson; and a compilation of fictive ethnographies, I explore the tensions that arise within a public Montessori environment. I show how the public school system limits and constrains the Montessori method, and how the subject of Montessori is seemingly at odds with the public school subject. I argue that if the Montessori method is updated with pieces of Dewey's and Freire's philosophies and practices, we can create a public setting of high performing learners who can also think critically.

Contents

Abstract ... v

Acknowledgments ... 8

Introduction ... 9

- Research Question and Methodology ... 10
- Educational Reform and Accountability Tools ... 13
- Montessori in Durham ... 18
- Anthropology and Education ... 20
- Literature Review ... 21

Chapter 1: The Subject ... 29

- The Jeffersonian Model Versus the Dewey Model ... 31
- Critical Pedagogy: Paulo Freire ... 32
- Neoliberalism and Critical Pedagogy ... 34
- Conclusion ... 38

Chapter 2: The Montessori Subject ... 39

- The Path to Normalization in the Montessori Classroom ... 39
- The First Two Waves of Montessori in the United States ... 42
- The Third Wave of Montessori and Magnet Schools ... 47
- Kilpatrick's Criticism of Montessori ... 49
- Democracy and Montessori Education ... 52
- Conclusion ... 56

Final Conclusion.. 57

To Kill a Mockingbird 66

References.. 67

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Introduction

In the spring of my junior year of college—while I was considering potential topics for a thesis for my cultural anthropology major—I had a discussion with a close friend in which I discovered that she had never read *To Kill a Mockingbird.* How could she never have read such an essential book? My eighth grade experience was dominated by *To Kill a Mockingbird.* It was central to not only the language arts curriculum but also to a good part of our history curriculum.

I was shocked that we had had such different experiences. We grew up about an hour and a half away from each other, in the same state. Both of our families are white, middle class families, and we each lived in the suburbs of major cities—Washington D.C. and Richmond. The major difference in our education is that she went to public school and I went to private school. Before this moment, I had never taken the time to wonder at the intricate differences that lie within the "school system" in the United States. As I pressed her for a complete illustration of her school experience, I realized that her grade promotion had been contingent upon her performance on a standardized test at the end of each academic year.

I had known students who had been held back a grade level, but the reasoning never had to do with standardized testing. Often, families chose to have their sons repeat grades as a strategy to improve future athletic performance, and when students were required by the school to repeat grades, it was because their teachers felt as if

another year would behoove their intellectual growth. Test performance was never the reason.

Intrigued, I signed up for a class on public policy in United States education. Education classes at Duke University have a built-in service-learning component through the Duke Partnership for Service. Education students undergo training and are placed in classrooms within Durham Public Schools—the public school district around Duke—and generally serve as tutors. Many times each semester, the students are asked to reflect on the theoretical models that are discussed in their Duke classes that they see applied in the DPS classrooms.

Research Question and Methodology

My experiences in this class, on top of my conversation with my friend, led me to wonder how different philosophies of education—and the resulting institutions that are built from them—affect the kinds of students and citizens that schools produce. In this thesis, I draw on theorists such as Thomas Jefferson, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Maria Montessori, and their contemporary followers. I use their arguments to establish the philosophical outline of standard public education in the United States and an alternative—the Montessori method.

What is the Montessori method? In Rome in 1907, based on the belief that children are naturally eager for knowledge and capable of initiating their own learning

within specific environments, Dr. Maria Montessori developed an alternative child-centered method of teaching as part of an urban renewal project. The five core components of a Montessori education are: properly trained Montessori teachers, multi-age classrooms, Montessori materials, child-directed work, and uninterrupted work periods (American Montessori Society 2018). The aesthetics of the ordered classroom are designed to arouse children's curiosity whilst providing a calm, nurturing, ordered environment to learn in. Children are at liberty to choose the materials they want to play with, and when they need help or guidance, they interact either with their peers or with their teachers. This method of student-led experiential learning develops and promotes a sense of responsibility and independence in the child (American Montessori Society 2018).

My key questions are 1. What is the history of educational reform out of which the current U.S. educational system has emerged? 2. What are the philosophical critiques of these reforms? And how do they shape alternative forms of pedagogy? 3. What do these philosophies of education tell us about the relationship between the developing economic systems of America, and the resulting role of educational institutions within those systems? 4. What is the place of the Montessori philosophy of education within this history of educational reform and debate? 5. What kinds of people—citizens, students, laborers, thinkers—do these systems intend to produce? Finally, I ask 6. What

are the wider effects and implications of Montessori philosophy within public education on student learning?

My proposal is to examine these questions within the localized community of a Montessori middle school in the Durham Public Schools system, in North Carolina. Half of DPS is made up of magnet schools. Students can either go to the traditional public school that they are zoned for, or they can enter the lottery to apply for entrance to a magnet school. If an elementary-aged student is enrolled in an elementary magnet program, she has the first bid to the next level of that particular magnet focus. In 2004, DPS established its second magnet Montessori elementary program; however, there was no Montessori middle school for the students to phase into. Parents demanded that the school board open a Montessori middle school, in large part because their children had nowhere to go after elementary school and often had to re-enter the lottery (LMMS About 2019; DPSNC Enrollment 2019). The board opened the first DPS Montessori middle school in the fall of 2010.

In order to explore these questions within the current public Montessori setting, I draw on past focuses of anthropology in education to determine larger ideas of the role of education. Within these various roles that anthropology has previously studied, I situate current U.S. educational institutions and philosophies. I also use the question of accountability to outline the story of educational reform in the United States. Then, I analyze the role of education in the United States with the educational philosophies of

Jefferson, Dewey, and Freire. Once I have established an outline of the current moment of public education—through the relationships between the economic system, education reform, and educational philosophies—I return to the Montessori public sphere. I then draw on what Montessori says about itself, and my own experiences, to piece together a fictive ethnography[1] of the Montessori classroom.

Educational Reform and Accountability Tools

Today, as a result of President Barack Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), state public schools are required to:

- Test students in reading and math in grades 3-8
- Adopt challenging standards submit peer-reviewed accountability plans to the Education Department
- Pick and submit accountability goals
- Incorporate and weigh at least four indicators into their accountability systems (Klein 2015)

All four of the sections of this act refer to accountability. But what is accountability? And who is accountable to whom?

[1] While an anthropological inquiry into the relationship between Montessori education and public school education would rely on ethnographic analysis of these systems in action, my research could not be undertaken in a local school setting. In order to benefit from the analytic yield of ethnographic attention to everyday lived details, I have utilized what I am calling 'fictive ethnography' – an imagined everyday context that is rooted in what Montessori philosophy mandates a classroom look like, existing ethnographies of Montessori education, as well as my own experiences of Montessori education through volunteer tutoring. These scenarios, then, are not representative of actual Montessori classrooms but rather an attempt to think about the possibilities of a public Montessori classroom, in which moments of creativity, community, and critical thinking exist within an educational system still accountable to standardized testing requirements.

The story of accountability begins with redlining practices in the housing market in the 1930s. In 1937, government surveyors began grading and color-coding neighborhoods in order to steer investment away from high-risk areas (Fullilove and Wallace 2011; Jan 2018). High-risk, or red, districts were areas with old buildings and non-white families (Fullilove and Wallace 2011)[2]. Loans in these targeted neighborhoods became either nonexistent or incredibly expensive. Ultimately, the property values in redlined neighborhoods began to fall, and most non-white families could not afford to move out (Jan 2018). Because public schools were, and still are, funded primarily by state and local sales and property taxes, these redlined districts were ultimately left with less money to spend on their public schools than districts with higher property values (Urban 2017). The fallout of the Supreme Court Brown vs. Board of Education decision of 1954 exacerbated this imbalance. The decision stated that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional. One of the unanticipated results of the landmark decision was that white families began to move out of racially mixed neighborhoods in order to preserve de facto racial segregation in schools and neighborhoods (Jayapal n.d.).

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson sought to alleviate the economic disparity of redlining with his Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESEA was part of the late president's four-pronged approach to battling national poverty. The act, for the first time in U.S. history, inserted the hand of the federal government into public education

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[2] Neighborhoods were color-coded in order to reflect levels of risk: green, blue, yellow, and red (Jan 2018).

by promising funding to public schools in low-income areas (Matthews 2014; Klein 2015a). However, to preserve its Constitutional integrity, ESEA included neither stipulations to regulate the use of the funding it provided nor any way to measure the results (Klein 2015; Boyle and Lee 2015; Hunt Institute 2016).

Growing frustration towards the lack of measurability ignited the beginning of the school accountability conversation that would take over the 1990s. Business owners in the private sector—taxpayers—wanted to know if their tax money was actually changing anything (Hunt Institute 2016).

Partly as a solution to these frustrations, President George W. Bush updated ESEA to No Child Left Behind in 2001. The major change of NCLB was that it tied ESEA's federal funding to accountability testing. Schools whose students tested well received funding. Schools whose students did not test well did not. It placed schools' financial burdens directly onto students and teachers. For the first time, teachers and students were directly accountable to the federal government. The accountability model at the core of NCLB's testing was based off of the rationale of the economic principal-agent problem. The principal-agent problem states that if the activities and outcomes of an enterprise—the school—are unclear to the stakeholders—the taxpayers, the government, etc.—those who work within the enterprise—the teachers—may behave in a manner contrary stakeholder interests. Transparent outcomes and activities might result in behavior entirely in line with stakeholder interest. Applied to the school, the

argumentation is that if educators are effectively monitored, the result could be an improvement of student outcomes (Hanusheck, Machin, and Woessmann 2011: 386). Testing became the tool with which the federal government evaluated schools and teachers. NCLB's punitive measures for low-scoring schools—such as requiring specific use for federal funding[3], instituting sanctions, and removing teachers and administrators from office (Darling-Hammond 2010)—ultimately made teachers' occupations increasingly more precarious, as they had to produce a specific product. If they failed to produce what the standardized tests said they were supposed to produce, teachers lost their jobs.

Standardized testing placed all public schools on the same plane, and this flattening of public education highlighted how different individual state educations were (Carter and Welner 2013). In order to alleviate the differences between this new, flattened sense of the quality of state educations, national bodies began to work together in 2007 to formulate a set of educational standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2018). The idea was that if all teachers, across the United States, had the same set of standards to teach to, then education across the country would be equal. The final draft of the Common Core State Standards was released in 2010.

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[3] In failing schools, a portion of federal money was required to be set aside for school choice and free tutoring programs for students. The idea was that if schools could not use the money they were granted to increase student performance, the law would require them to put at least 10% of the funds towards programs targeted specifically to help those students. However, many students did not utilize these programs, and the money that could have benefitted the schools in other ways became tied up in wasted efforts (Klein 2015b).

The development and release of the Common Core overlapped with President Barack Obama's temporary solutions to NCLB. Unable to pass a new update of NCLB through Congress—due to heated debates between the parties—Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan began to offer waivers to states that would temporarily free them from NCLB legislation. The waivers gave states the freedom to set their own achievement goals, create their own accountability measures, and develop their own plans for intervention in low-performing schools. In exchange for this flexibility and break from centralized power, states had to adopt the standard of their choice for college and career readiness and create evaluative guidelines for teachers and students that were based partly on testing performance (McNeil and Klein 2011). The president paired the release of these waivers with a multi-billion dollar competitive grant that would be awarded to states that demonstrated commitment to improving the quality of public education. The waivers and grant were meant to inspire commitment to innovation and creativity in state boards of education. They were also the beginning of the movement to return the power of accountability to state hands. Constitutionally, President Obama could not designate any one set of standards to be the national standard, but the timing of the release of the Common Core resulted in its adoption by many states as their standard (Sanchez and Turner 2017).

Finally, in 2015, President Obama passed Every Student Succeeds Act through Congress as the most recent update to Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education

Act (1965). With it, he officially returned most of the power of determination to the states, but the effects of NCLB are still felt within the public education sphere (Chalk 2019). Major criticisms of NCLB included that its emphasis on standardized testing—paired with its aggressive punitive measures—ultimately narrowed the curriculum and incentivized schools to focus only on tested subjects (Klein 2015b). Critics also fear that the flattened view of education that standardization created perpetuated the harmful ideas that students: 1. Only learn in schools 2. All begin as blank slates and theoretically progress at the same rate 3. Whose talents exist outside of what standardized testing evaluates are condemned automatically to failure (Carter and Welner 2013).

The reality is that this tale of educational reform is also a tale of funding. When we look back to 1965, to Johnson's original efforts through ESEA, federal money was a positively intended solution to alleviate the financial imbalance in public school districts due to the racial divide. But that original intention was tainted as pressure mounted to track its effectiveness. With the introduction of testing as a strategy to measure schools' operational efficiency, federal funding became a carrot that the government held out in front of schools in order to manipulate them to its productive demands.

Montessori in Durham

So how does Montessori fit into this financial tale? The Montessori model is historically rooted in private education, and private schools in the United States are free

from these educational reforms because they are funded through private means—generally donations and student tuition. Generally, private Montessori schools have the flexibility that they need because their funding sources give it to them. However, Montessori schools that are a part of the Local Education Agency—or public school district—do not have this luxury. Typically, they receive traditional public funding as well as money from the American Montessori Society. This double funding represents a double philosophical commitment. In exchange for the funds, Lakewood Montessori promises to uphold the expectations of both the North Carolina Board of Education and the American Montessori Society, and it can be held accountable by either if it fails to do so.

These overlapped commitments invite questioning of how Montessori educators' ability to teach Montessori—a pedagogical philosophy that places individual students at the center of the classroom, rather than the tests—is affected. How does the Montessori method, which is focused on the whole, multi-dimensional child, work in an education environment that has been flattened by standardized testing? Simply put, Montessori must adapt. Educators and administrators must weave patchwork practices from pieces of the Montessori method and those of the standardized public classroom.

Anthropology and Education

The question of culture is a widely debated subject in Anthropology. The first influential and accepted definition came from Edward Tylor in 1887 (Prinz 2011). Tylor's (1887: 1 in Stocking 1966 and Prinz 2011) definition was so broad—it covered "knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"—that most subsequent anthropologists found themselves wrestling with what they believed to be important factors (Prinz 2011). Some, like Malinowski, focused their attentions on systems. Others, like Herskovits, believed culture to be rooted in physical artifacts. Linguists like Geertz based culture in semiotic symbols and signifiers. The similarity across all constructions of culture is that culture is shared within a community, and somehow it is transmitted. But how is it transmitted?

Anthropologists have asked this question in communities all over the world. The question simultaneously asks who transmits culture, what direction it is transmitted, and what are the modes of transmission?

Since 1904, schools have been a site of anthropological fieldwork. The question of cultural transmission has been investigated from a few angles (Spindler 1955). In the 1920s and '30s, anthropologists were primarily concerned with how education prepared immigrants for democracy (Chernoff and Hochwald 2006). In the 1940s, anthropologists were interested in racial prejudices in education. And after the landmark Brown vs.

Board of Education decision of 1954, anthropologists became interested in education as an equal opportunity (Chernoff and Hochwald 2006).

According to George Spindler (1955)—who is considered to be the father of the discipline of anthropology of education—anthropology applied to education picked up significantly in the 1950s. Many anthropologists, such as Mandelbaum argued that the foundational principles of the discipline should be taught in elementary and secondary schools. They argued that the humanistic objectivity of anthropology should at least be integrated into social science classes (Spindler 1955). Others, like Jules Henry, used ethnographic methodology to investigate the processes of culturing and socialization in classrooms (Spindler 1955). It is this line of anthropological thinking in education, in the question of whether transmission of culture is political, that I would like to frame my research.

Literature Review

The foundation of the United States public education system began with Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson—a key figure in the overall development of the independent United States who served as an ambassador in France—was highly influenced by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment period in Europe, and his theories of education reflect that influence. The core theory of the French Revolution and Enlightenment was that education would set the people free from the aristocracy (Cox Jr. 2004). After the American Revolution freed the colonies from a tyrannical ruler who ruled them without

concern for their desires or wellbeing, Jefferson sought to create a democratic republic that would be ruled for the people, by the people. He believed that education could serve as a vehicle to develop the next generation into the leaders and electorate the republic needed, as well as instill participatory values in all citizens (Cox Jr. 2004; Carpenter 2013). In 1779, he proposed a pyramid system educational model. At the base was a free, three-year primary education that would give all students—white males and females—the tools that they needed to participate in both the republic and the economy as good citizens. After primary school, males could compete for paid enrollment at the next level. University would draw from this group of learners (Carpenter 2013). Those who made it to the top, to universities, would lead the country, and everyone else was, by then, prepared to be led. Ultimately, this pyramid system took on a split across class lines, as students from poor families could not afford to continue up through the pyramid, and that split looked like a track for the laboring and a separate for the learned (Tyack 1967).

The underlying purpose of Jefferson's education model was to support the republic, to create a generation that can maintain and improve it. In order to do this, Jefferson's model falls back on a transmission mode that I will call "giving" for the purposes of this thesis. "Giving" culture is a unidirectional mode of transmission. The teacher presents facts and information to the student, and the student receives it all. The role of the educator and the school—regardless of the track—is simply to prepare the

student to fit into his role in society. To understand this model, imagine the student seated at his desk. His teacher stands directly in front of him at a podium. The teacher lectures information to his student, and in the form of a geometrical ray, the information is passed to the student who collects it all in binders and notebooks so that someday he can make decisions based on this collection of knowledge. A key part of this model is that the student utilizes this learned information to build the nation's economy.

Alternative methods to a "giving" education became popular at the turn of the 20th century. In 1916, philosopher John Dewey published *Democracy in Education*. He posed a new purpose of education. Dewey wrote that the process of education was "the means of [the] social continuity of life" (Dewey 1966: 2). By "continuity of life", Dewey was suggesting a model of education in which students were not simply recipients of knowledge but active participants themselves in the process of the transmission knowledge. Based loosely on biological sciences, Dewey's exchange model is contingent upon variation between the two individuals involved in the process. To Dewey, the "purpose of education [was] not to fill a void in the mind of the child so as to raise it to the level of the adult, but to bring young and old together in order that social life should carry on," (Ingold 2017: 5). Similarly to how during procreation life is created by combining pieces of one individual with another, the educative process creates social life. The teacher presents material, the student responds to the material. The teacher then responds to the student with his own thoughts and experiences. This moment of conflict

between various experiences and interpretations is what creates and grows social life (Ingold 2017).

My illustration of the Dewey model is more complex than that of the Jeffersonian model. I believe that it can be broken down into units. The smallest unit of transmission is between the student and the teacher—although the student and teacher roles are not limited only to the classroom or school. Imagine the Jefferson illustration again, but in the simple Dewey unit, the student and teacher are both seated. The teacher introduces a compelling topic to the student. Interest piqued, the student listens to what the teacher has to say and then responds with his own thoughts and experiences. The teacher listens and absorbs what the student has to say in response. Rather than a solitary ray that represents the unidirectional flow of knowledge, a series of geometrical rays bounce back and forth between the two individuals.

When this unit is multiplied, one gets an image of a planar web. Individuals of all generations exist as points on a plane, and information flows back and forth between points, creating an intricate web. This web is how I imagine that Dewey sees social life. The social aspect is in the exchange of different experiences and opinions (Ingold 2017). In Dewey's model, knowledge and culture are not stagnant entities that can be passed on. They are malleable forms that are passed around and changed by each pair of hands that hold them.

Dewey's argument fundamentally takes issue with the transmission method used in the "giving" model because it minimizes the extent of the educative process and goes against natural growth. It isolates learning from the rest of life by locating it specifically in the classroom. This criticism caught on with critical theorists in the1960s. Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire analyzed the "giving" model through a Marxist lens and postulated that the oppressed—the laboring class—was prescribed his oppression through the "giving" mode of education. Freire (1972) wrote that the only identity the oppressed man knows is that which has been given to him by his oppressor. In order to break the system of oppression, man must be introduced to, or "discover", his own autonomous self. Hence, original critical pedagogical practices intend to facilitate that introduction by making the individual aware of his place in history. Awareness of history makes the individual aware of the conditions that have led him to his present and the possibilities that lie before him (De Lissovoy 2018).

Freire's (1972) designated term for the education model that he argued against was the "banking" model. He believed that educators viewed students as empty accounts they were tasked to fill with information. While this model looks identical to the ray I have drawn for you in my Jeffersonian "giving" model, I do not believe that they are entirely the same, for they are rooted in very different historical moments. However, Freire's logic drew the attention of many Marxist scholars in the United States who applied his theories to the U.S. system.

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, both economists, used Freire's ideas in their book *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) to outline how the U.S. public education system perpetuates class inequalities by indoctrinating students into the dominant neoliberal ideological narrative. Because the needs of the nation's economy are the driving factors of the principle aims of the schools, students are ultimately molded to fit those needs without dissent or interruption (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Both Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux also picked up on Freire's ideas of oppression. Part of the process of oppression was that the oppressor manipulates the pedagogical practices within the school in order to rationalize the ideology to the children. Due to this normalization of oppression, students fall victim to this particular view of the world that has been created for them (Giroux 2005).

Because leaders such as Thomas Jefferson created the footprint of the U.S. public education system, the "giving" model of education became the traditional model of the republic. These criticisms of the traditional "giving" model are important in the discussion of my research because Montessori methodology seems to rest somewhere between "giving" and the critical pedagogy critiques. In the Montessori method, the student is at the center of the classroom. The teacher arranges the classroom and its materials so that by investigating the contents of the room, the student can learn experientially. Only when the student asks for help should the teacher truly intervene in the learning process. At its core, the goals of the Montessori method are to develop the

child's sense of self and independence, foster the child's natural curiosity, instill an appreciation for calm and order in the child, and ultimately develop the child's awareness of community and nature (Williams and Keith 2000; Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi 2005; American Montessori Society 2018). It is an experiential discovery.

The Montessori classroom is a complex model that looks like a combination of these alternative methods. It exists somewhere between the traditional "giving" classroom and the alternative "exchange" and "self-discovery" classrooms. The traditional classroom can be traced back to Thomas Jefferson and his hope to sustain the governing and economic model of the new United States. It is an integral cog in the machine of the business that is the United States. The Montessori classroom's goals to develop children who are independent, have an appreciation for order, and have a cultivated sense of discovery are not fundamentally different from Jefferson's ideals. These classrooms seek to produce students who are good fits in society. Where the traditional model and the Montessori model differ is in the methodology of teaching. Methodologically speaking, the Montessori classroom has aspects of the "self-discovery" classroom of the critical pedagogues. But the Montessori goal is not to free the child from his oppression. In its focus on community development, Montessori displays aspects of Dewey's "exchange" model. The difficulty that Montessori seems to run into in the public sphere is methodological. There is tension between the Montessori method

and the traditional method of "giving". Within the public school, the Montessori method must be adapted in order to fit the constraints of reform.

The story of this research is that of a philosophy operating within an institution in which it does not fit perfectly. Critical pedagogy is not the same thing as the Montessori method, for Montessori is not critical of institutional oppression. But I believe that critical pedagogy is imperative to examine in order to understand the pressures that the traditional public education system places on the Montessori method. In the first chapter, I examine the critical perspective of the evolutionary effects of neoliberalism within public education. In the second chapter, I look at the history of Montessori in the United States in order to illustrate how, since its introduction to the country, it has been altered and modified to fit into both sides of the American education system. Overall, I argue that the Montessori method cannot maintain its complete integrity within our current public school system because its methods are challenged by the institutional constraints of standardized testing and neoliberal educational reform. However, philosophical aspects of Montessori can fit in the public setting because Montessori and the public system share an intended subject. Therefore, Montessori public schools are in a constant state of tension between methods and subject.

Chapter 1: The Subject

The research question that this thesis seeks to set up is the question *How do overlapped commitments—to Montessori and to the public standard—affect Montessori educators' ability to teach Montessori given that the Montessori method is focused on developing the whole-child, and the public education environment has been flattened to standardized testing?* In order to situate this research, we need to understand how the Montessori philosophy relates to the traditional philosophy of public education, which we have narrowed to the Jeffersonian model. We also need to understand how that Jeffersonian model looks in our current neoliberal moment—over 200 years after its inception.

In this chapter, I explore the difference between the subjects of the pedagogical models and theories that I previously introduced. What kind of student is each one trying to create and how? The pedagogical models that we are dealing with here are all similar but different. They are rooted in different economic systems and periods of time. Some seem to share aspects of methodologies but diverge philosophically. Some discuss education as a process that occurs in schools where others view it as a constant experience that connects the individual to his peers and environment. The extent of the variables between them can make it difficult to compare them side-by-side. But if we

pare them down to the subject they intend to create, we find the least common denominator that we can use to compare them all.[4]

The purpose of this chapter is to create a platform on which I can begin to discuss contemporary Montessori public schools in the next chapter. Once I have compared the basic traditional and alternative models, I can begin to historicize the development of the Jeffersonian model. I examine the shift in the Jeffersonian model through the paradigmatic reorganization of the neoliberal moment. In order to analyze these structural changes, I draw on critical theorists such as Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and Noah De Lissovoy. Critical theory is fundamentally rooted in Marxism, so the theoretical framework is built to sustain and perform an analysis of the historical transitions of capitalism. Analyzing changes in critical pedagogy over time gives us an analysis that reflects the changes that neoliberalism enacts.

This investigation will begin to construct the outline of the spectrum of traditional and alternative subjects that I will utilize in the next chapter to compare the Montessori method against the theories of this chapter. The purpose of the examination of changes within critical pedagogy due to neoliberalism is to develop an illustration of

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[4] Fractions with different denominators (the bottom term) cannot be added, subtracted, or compared. In order to do so, one must find the lowest common multiple between the denominators and convert each individual fraction to its equivalent value with that denominator. This process is called finding the least common denominator.

how the neoliberal shift has modified public education The resulting illustration will serve to contextualize my discussion of Montessori public schools in Chapter 2.

The Jeffersonian Model Versus the Dewey Model

The question of the subject links all models of education, for each seeks to produce a certain subject. In the Jeffersonian model, the teacher gives the student a set of skills and knowledge. The goal of the free, three-year Jeffersonian primary education was to provide all citizens with: the information needed for the transaction of business; the ability to calculate; the ability to express himself through writing; moral improvement through reading; the understanding of his duties to his neighbors and country; knowledge of his rights; and the ability to intelligently observe faithfully the social relations in which he will be placed (Carpenter 2013). That giving process of these skills and assets developed the student into a suitable fit for the new republic. The subject of the Jeffersonian model was a student who could maintain and improve the economic system without dissent.

The subject of the Dewey model was vastly different, for the heart of the Dewey model of education was neither the economy nor the structural integrity of the government, which both created the center of the Jeffersonian educational model. Education had a different meaning for Dewey. Instead of preparing students for life, Dewey's model sought to create social connections between students and other students,

their teachers, and the environment. Dewey took issue with the traditional, Jeffersonian model of education because he believed that traditional schools isolated information from knowledge. Knowledge was lived experience and social relations. Information was the factual content that schools felt they could transmit easily to students—filling them as if they were empty vessels (Ingold 2017). The subject of the Dewey model is an individual who is socially connected to his peers and to his environment.

Critical Pedagogy: Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire's initial work sought to develop yet another entirely different subject: the emancipated Brazilian peasantry. Freire wrote about, and worked with, an oppressed, uneducated peasantry who he believed was oppressed by a system of prescribed identity (Foley 2010). The only identity that the oppressed ever knew was that which was given to them by their oppressor. The *mode* of transmission here looks similar to that of the Jeffersonian education model.

The student[5] receives the information that he needs in order to fit societal expectations from his teacher. Who he is, as a student, is a vessel filled with the given information. His identity is impressed upon him.

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[5] Here, I use the words "student" and "teacher" in order to maintain a vein of similarity between these two methods. "Learner" may be better suited here, for the "student" that Freire speaks to is not a classical student who goes to school. In fact, his student does not attend school or receive formal education. For the same reason, "teacher" is not an appropriate term either.

Freire sought to break this model because he believed that it was perpetuated by the capitalist system. Breaking the model required that the peasantry was introduced to its autonomy and its place in history (De Lissovoy 2018). If individuals in the peasantry could understand how they had become oppressed by the economic and social structures, and they were made aware of the freedom of possibility that lay before them, they could fight back against the oppressive model. They could emancipate themselves. Freire sought to create agents of history (Filc and Ram 2014).

That is where Freire's pedagogical model is inherently different from Jefferson's model—and Dewey's. Jefferson sought to perpetuate the system, to create the workforce that it needed to operate. Freire sought to educate the workforce so that the workers could change the system. Dewey's ideas had little, if anything, to do with the politics of economics.

Freire's work rests entirely upon the traditional political organization of Marxism. The agricultural laborer is born into economic conditions under which he must sell his labor to the landowner in order to survive. The landowner and the laborer are locked in a constant state of conflict. But contemporary theorists—such as Noah De Lissovoy, whose work I will refer to often—note that the original critical pedagogy model cannot account for the current economic conditions. The base principles remain the same, but the methods of execution have to adapt (De Lissovoy 2018).

Neoliberalism and Critical Pedagogy

The current, neoliberal moment is one born from economic constrictions in the Western world. During the economic crisis of 1974-82, governments attempted to socialize the economy. However, because the economy did not stabilize, many criticized these measures as market impairments or distortions—it was believed that governmental action ultimately undercut market forces and principles (O'Connor 2010). In the 1980s, governments began to remodel their presence in the market, reasserting competition as the main market mechanism. This remodeling had three components: state rationalization, market contestability, and factor mobility. In short, state rationalization and market contestability refer to the restructuring of policies to reorganize how people think about the market and to level out access to it by removing all obstacles and barriers for both foreign and domestic firms (O'Connor 2010). Factor mobility freed factors of production to be moved across processes of production within and between industries (Suranovic 1999). This movement of capital within the free, unregulated market defines the neoliberal moment.

But how does neoliberalism affect critical pedagogy? Freire's model was based off of the conflict between the two classes. The movement of neoliberalism changed the nature of the conflict. Sociologist John O'Connor (2010) notes that part of the socialization activities of the economic crisis (1974-82) gave workers higher wages and social protections. Unions won power for the worker. But then, "[to] reassert capital's

dominance and help restore profitability, the balance of class forces was recalibrated in capital's direction," O'Connor writes (2010: 697). The dissolution of unions left workers alone and unprotected against market forces.

A result of this shift was an increased sense of precariousness. The new legislation took back the semblance of power that the worker had just gained and reorganized the relations of production. The worker, as a factor of production, was again completely subjected to competition within the market—including low wages, vast levels of unemployment, and no grounding in a particular location. He was subjected to the free movement of the market. And this contributed to a burgeoning sense of atomized anxiety. De Lissovoy (2018) argues that the original methods of critical pedagogy cannot account for this fragmentation of modern society. What Freire's critical pedagogy sought to combat was the prescribed oppression of the whole laboring class, but De Lissovoy (2018) proposes that what it should now combat is oppression through atomization.

What does this neoliberal moment look like in schools in the United States? As we discussed with the traditional Jeffersonian model, the U.S. education system is meant to produce citizens who will fit seamlessly into society. The rising unemployment rate created a depth of surplus in the labor market that was imperative in the effort to replace government intervention in the market with the mechanism of competition. But it also placed increasing pressure on the individual. In order to secure jobs, students

must, from an early age, be the best and must be flexible and innovative (De Lissovoy 2018). Technological advancements and factor mobility have blurred the parameters of work and increased demand for workers whose creativity can be harvested as human capital (Goldin 2014). In economic terms, human capital is intangible economic growth that cannot be explained by physical productive factors (Goldin 2014).

Critical theorists Peter McLaren (2005) and Henry Giroux (2007) criticized educational reform implemented in response to neoliberal demands for how it restructured public education to maintain the hold the private sector has over the workforce. By manipulating the institution of public education to match contemporary capitalism, neoliberal reformers ensured that the workforce would be atomized and adaptable enough to fit the fluid, mercurial, precarious demands of the new economy (Shannon 2000). The school is an institution that churns out laborers in the form of the student. Future employers and other stockholders are incentivized to regulate the productivity in schools because regulation allows them to monitor the next generational pool they will be able to hire from. It is an extended form of control over their laborers. Educational reform—No Child Left Behind (2001)—also rationalizes and institutionalizes neoliberal ideology (Giroux 2007). It indoctrinates students into the capitalist system.

An explicit example of this rationalization is testing in schools. The constant valuation of students through testing and rankings perpetuates the fragmentation of the

up-and-coming generation (De Lissovoy 2018). Also, by flattening the value of the child to a test score, one diminishes the value of the child's various other skills, such as collaboration and other non-tested skills and abilities. Institutionalized testing is just one example of how reform conditions students to the economic system of anxiety and precariousness. In order to combat this pattern of anxiety and oppression that are perpetuated and enforced by neoliberal reform, De Lissovoy (2018) suggests that schools foster community, collaboration, and collective critique. How? He suggests "a departure from test-driven teaching, [and] also from a more general fear of unscripted or unanticipated moments and gaps in classroom discourse" in order to "clear a space for dialogue," (De Lissovoy 2018: 201). Rather than create the next workforce, education should be used as a system for social awakening, where students can reflect on and solve their own problems, as well as larger, societal problems (McLaren 2005).

De Lissovoy's fundamental argument is that the basic principles of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy are important but the methods do not fit the current economic moment. The subject of De Lissovoy's argument reflects this disjointedness. Both Freire and De Lissovoy seek to create individuals who are critically aware of their own autonomous selves and their community so that they can challenge and renegotiate the politics of capitalist production. But Freire seeks to do this through an emphasis on the self where De Lissovoy emphasizes the community and collaboration.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to determine the subject as the least common denominator across various theories of pedagogy and discuss how the changes within the subject of critical pedagogy reflect economic and reform changes. This latter discussion ultimately defines the neoliberal moment in which the next chapter will be rooted. No Child Left Behind—the 2001 Bush update to Johnson's 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act—is a product of this reorganization of neoliberalism. The next chapter will discuss the effect of NCLB, and neoliberalism, on public Montessori institutions.

Chapter 2: The Montessori Subject

In this chapter I discuss the Montessori method in the context of the two main American schools of pedagogical thought—that of Jefferson and that of Dewey—and in relationship to the critiques of critical pedagogy. Overall, this chapter seeks to understand how the subject of Montessori education compares to the Jeffersonian subject, as well as how Montessori philosophies change along with the neoliberal shift. To accomplish this, I explore the three waves of implementation of the Montessori method in U.S. schools. This history illuminates how each wave changes the subject of Montessori education, which suggests that American Montessori does not see the maintenance of the fidelity of the original Montessori method as being imperative. It also suggests that the American Montessori method is vulnerable to change depending on the needs of the education system it is applied to.

The Path to Normalization in the Montessori Classroom

The North America Montessori Teachers' Association (2018) reports the Montessori subject as the self-mastered, "normalized" student. At first glance, the word "normalized" indicates socialization akin to the Jeffersonian model. It implies that students have been conditioned and molded to a predetermined standard of normalcy. But Dr. Maria Montessori (1949) believed that children have a set of characteristics—love of order, love of working alone, independence, self-discipline, etc.—that emerge only

when children's developmental needs are met (Standing 1957). Therefore, the process of normalization in Montessori education is to utilize a specific methodology in order to draw those characteristics out to develop an independent, self-driven child.

According to the American Montessori Society (2018), there are five core components of Montessori education: properly trained Montessori teachers, multi-age classrooms, Montessori materials, child-directed work, and uninterrupted work periods. Dr. Maria Montessori believed that children were naturally eager for knowledge and capable of initiating their own learning if these five demands were satisfied. It is imperative to the application of the method that teachers are not only properly trained but understand the deeper logic of the methodology. Without that deeper understanding, the elements of the classroom can easily become ritualistic and banal—which could be potentially harmful to the development of the child (Harder 2015; Block 2015).

The teacher's preparedness to teach Montessori is also important because Montessori inverts the traditional didactic model—where the teacher lectures information to the child (Lillard 2013)—of education, which I have referred to as the "giving" model in the introduction and chapter 1. Theoretically, in the Montessori model, the student determines the pace and direction of his education. The teacher works extensively to prepare the environment for the child, to create a sense of calm and

order in the classroom. This not only fosters a love of order in the child but also limits the interruptive forces of the environment (NAMTA 2017).

The aspect of student-led education is the central characteristic of Montessori education. Within the calm, carefully prepared environment, the child has the freedom to learn experientially with the elements of the classroom. Particularly in elementary schools, these elements are often "beautifully crafted, specially designed learning materials," (American Montessori Society 2018). The hand painted materials draw the eye and beckon students to touch them and to pick them up. The student learns experientially from his use of the materials (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi 2005). The aesthetics of the ordered classroom are designed to arouse children's curiosity while providing a calm, nurturing, ordered environment to learn in. Children are at liberty to choose the materials they want to use, and when they need help or guidance, they interact either with their peers or with their teachers (AMS 2018).

The final two elements of the Montessori classroom are multi-age classes and continuous work cycles. Multi-age classrooms create a dynamic between older and younger children, which promotes peer-tutelage. This nurtures collaboration and communication skills between peers (AMS 2018). For 2 work cycles per day, which span between 2-3 hours each, students self-select activities, play with and learn from them for as long as they want, put them away, and repeat. Teachers provide small group lessons and individual support during this time, but they rarely, if ever, lecture or teach the

whole class at once. The work cycle "facilitates the development of coordination, concentration, independence and order, with the assimilation of information," (AMS 2018).

Limiting interrupting forces is imperative in the Montessori middle school environment, for it minimizes the effect of self-consciousness in the classroom. The Montessori method is built on continuity; this is reflected in many of the elements of the classroom including the work cycles, the mixed ages, and the ordered aesthetics. The continuity of learning allows students to pass seamlessly through the various stages of development (NAMTA 2017).

The First Two Waves of Montessori in the United States

Dr. Maria Montessori opened the very first Montessori school, the *Casa dei Bambini*, in San Lorenzo, Italy in 1907. It was part of an urban reconstruction project to serve the working poor. The very roots of the Montessori method are in developing methods of education for disadvantaged children. Dr. Maria Montessori's original intended subject, based on her original work in Rome, was a child who had overcome financial and socioeconomic odds to complete his development (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008)

The Montessori method was introduced to the United States in 1909, and the majority of the U.S. public received it excitedly. Both the *New York Tribune* and the

Literary Digest dubbed Dr. Maria Montessori “The Most Interesting Woman of Europe” in 1913 (Beck 1961). However, the first Montessori school to open in the United States altered the fundamental basis of the Montessori method. The principles and practices were taken from Dr. Montessori’s original lectures and research, but they were applied in a private environment in Tarrytown, New York. Frank Vanderlip, the president of the National Bank of New York, provided the financial backing for the school (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008).[6]

Whitescarver and Cossentino (2008) report two important factors of the pre-war Montessori movement. The first was that its acceptance among wealthy families was driven by popular individuals’ public support of it. For example, in Boston, the Mayor offered Dr. Montessori freedom of the city, and in Cambridge, Harvard held a private lunch so that its professors could meet her (Beck 1961). In a sense, it was fashionable to support the Montessori method (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008). The second was that in the time period during which the method came to the United States, education reformers were busy seeking ways to deal with the influx of immigrants (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008). Between 1900 and 1920, more than 14.5 million immigrants were admitted to the U.S. (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services 2016). How to

[6] To give you an idea of the socioeconomic and demographic makeup of Tarrytown Village, NY, in 2017: the median household income (in 2017 U.S. dollars) was $111,031 (compared to the U.S. average, which was $61,372); the percent of the population in poverty was 2.8%; 91.8% of persons over 25 years old held a high school degree; 54.8% of those same persons held a Bachelor’s degree or higher; and 76.2% of the population identified as white alone.

effectively modify public education in order to integrate immigrants into the U.S. democratic society became a major focus for anthropology and other social sciences in the 1910s and 1920s (Chernoff and Hochwald 2006).

Reformers and social scientists evaluated the potential of the implementation of Montessori into U.S. public schools and ultimately decided that it was incompatible with the democratic effort (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008). These reformers were interested in vocational education, assimilation programs, and efforts to keep children of immigrants and the lower class in school to foster the development of American middle-class values. Essentially, the reformers of the period were not interested in a child-centered or experimental approach to education. They were dealing first and foremost with the problem of conditioning large numbers of immigrants to the U.S. system (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008). The result was that the public education sphere rejected Montessori. But private schools are not subject to the demands of national interest that constrain public education. The purpose of the private school is not to deal with mass swells of immigrants. Because they do not have to deal with these pressures, private schools have the room to focus on individual student development. This key difference fostered the growth of Montessori private schools in the United States. Historically, if we look back to the Jeffersonian model—and even the example of the Tarrytown Montessori school in 1911—private schools are for wealthy children, and

public schools are for everyone else. Unlike its origins in Italy, the Montessori method emerged in North America as a form of private schooling for wealthy families.

In 1914, soon after education reformers dismissed Montessori as a viable education method for public schools, William Heard Kilpatrick—a professor at Teachers College, Columbia—spurred an attack on the Montessori method from the academic community with the publishing of the report of his research regarding the method. I will come back to his findings in the next section. But his condemnation, and the resulting denunciation of the academic community, contributed greatly to the decreased popularity of Montessori in the United States.

However, Montessori has remerged in the United States twice since its first introduction to the country. In 1958, Nancy Rambusch opened—with the help of prominent Greenwich, Connecticut families—the Whitby School (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008). Her Greenwich supporters were mostly prominent Catholic mothers who, like herself, were looking for alternative methods of educating their young children. Together, they targeted other predominantly Catholic, white, suburban middle-class parents "who were dissatisfied with parochial schools and refused to send their children to public schools," (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008: 2583). Whitescarver and Cossentino (2008) note that—as demonstrated by her target audience—Rambusch's version of Montessori was the first to place a heavy emphasis on the Roman Catholic values that permeated Montessori philosophy. Because she was the

leader of the American Montessori Society—the official American branch of the original Association Montessori Internationale—these values became part of the American Montessori tradition.

Rambusch found success with her target audience primarily because of the post-Brown vs. Board of Education mood in the suburban middle-class population. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. In response, the white, suburban middle-class turned to private schools where, for the price of yearly tuition, they could essentially choose an exclusively white educational environment for their children (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008). The first two waves of Montessori in the United States—embodied in the Tarrytown School and the Whitby School—shifted the subject of Dr. Montessori's original work. Fundamentally, her work was meant to increase the development opportunities of underprivileged children in order to minimize poverty in Italy. These two waves of American Montessori were intended for an entirely different population of children. By making Montessori attainable only for children whose parents could afford private tuition, Rambusch and Vanderlip ultimately created a socioeconomic—and racial—gap in American Montessori education. The subject of the first two waves was the well-developed child of the middle class. The subject of Dr. Montessori's original work was the well-developed disadvantaged child. The former perpetuates socioeconomic divides in society, and the latter seeks to close the gap.

The Third Wave of Montessori and Magnet Schools

We now find ourselves in the third wave of American Montessori. In the previous chapter, I discussed critical pedagogy in the neoliberal moment. In short, the paradigmatic shift of neoliberalism is a turn away from economic stabilization efforts of socialization and towards a free market. The driving force of the free market is competition. The last chapter looked at the overarching response in schools to the neoliberal moment. From their inception, public schools have served as vehicles of indoctrination that produce children who will fit into the dominant capitalist ideology. As neoliberalism has introduced business-like values of efficiency and increasing profit margins to all areas of life, the public education system has adapted to reflect this paradigmatic shift.

Market values have permeated the public education system. Since the 1970s, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of magnet and charter schools in the U.S. The first magnet school was opened in 1968 to promote diversity in public schools. In order to accomplish this goal, magnet schools focus their curricula around particular themes that attract students from various zip codes (Hlnds 2017). The traditional model of public school districts is to draw a zone around a school. Students who live within that zone are expected to attend that specific public school. Magnet schools allow alternatives to children from all backgrounds (Hlnds 2017).

Magnet and charter schools increased the variation within the public school market. The variety allowed parents to hunt for the best schools in their area for their children in a way that mirrored the early waves of Montessori. In the first two waves, affluent parents isolated the practices of Montessori from the core philosophies because they believed that the practices were better for their children's development than traditional educational practices. The magnet system follows a similar pattern. Magnet schools' focused curricula are sought out as best fits for children, in terms of what will serve them the best in the future.

The rise of magnet and charter schools in the United States occurred around the same time as the third wave of Montessori (Whitescarver and Cossentino 2008). This was facilitated by the third wave's emphasis on expanding the reach of the Montessori method through public education, unlike the first two waves. While private enrollment numbers in Montessori schools have also continued to climb, this emphasis has resulted in over 500 Montessori public programs. According to the Montessori Census (2019)[7], there are 2,101 private Montessori programs and 518 public Montessori programs currently registered in the United States. While only about 20% of all registered U.S.

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[7] Exact statistics on the number of Montessori schools are difficult to find, for—according to the Whitescarver and Cossentino (2008) article—there are six separate Montessori agencies that schools can register with at this point. Also, systems such as the National Center for Education Statistics database struggle to determine schools as being Montessori if the word "Montessori" is not part of their title and if they are in the process of conversion.

Montessori institutions are public, the growth represents a shift in the foundations of American Montessori.

Particularly in magnet schools, this shift demands that we look again at the subject of Montessori. Is it in line with Dr. Maria Montessori's original subject?

In response to pervasive market values, the magnet system split Montessori practices from Montessori philosophy and offered the practices up to the public as a popular commodity. It created a market within public education, and the punitive accountability measures of No Child Left Behind solidified that market. How does the marketization of public schools affect the American Montessori subject?

Kilpatrick's Criticism of Montessori

In order to begin to explore this question, I return our attentions to William Heard Kilpatrick's condemning 1914 appraisal of the Montessori method. An associate professor at Teachers College, Columbia University in the philosophy of education at the time, his underlying concern with Montessori was that it did not allow children to experiment with alternative ways of solving problems (Beck 1961). The learning materials were constructed with specific problem-solving methods in mind. Although they were not presented in a didactic manner, they were didactic materials, for they carried a specific knowledge that was to be discovered in a specific way. Kilpatrick's major issue with this was informed largely by Dewey's attitudes towards education. He

argued that the Montessori method turned education into the process by which students unfolded a “primitive ego” rather than a life-long “engagement with an environment of problems,” (Beck 1961: 160).

If we contend that the school ultimately develops its students to discover and unfold their primitive egos, how does that change how we might think of the nature of the intended subject of Montessori? For one, it makes us consider the primitive ego.[8] The idea of unfurling a primitive ego assumes an element of predetermination. It is a given piece of who a child is. It is the self that exists in the child at his most undeveloped stage. This primitive ego appears to be different from the inherent characteristics that Montessori assumed all children had (Standing 1957).

The assumption of the primitive ego, and education through unfurling said ego, carries abstract similarities to Paolo Freire’s critical pedagogy. Freire argued that the Brazilian economic system had determined the nature of the laborer and the laboring class. The economic environment that the laborers are born into conditions them to believe that their identity is that of the subordinated laborer. The laborer knows nothing else besides this predetermined identity (De Lissovoy 2018). Abstractly, if the materials

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[8] The nature of the primitive ego has difficult to determine given that Kilpatrick’s book was published in 1914, and Freud first published his research on the ego in 1923. Because, according to child psychotherapist Philip Crockatt (2006), the primitive ego was a term utilized by Melanie Klein in 1932 to refer to a basic form of identity and self that is constructed from the perception of relationships with external objects as a newborn around the time of birth, we must conclude that the use of the term “primitive ego” is the choice and interpretation of Robert Beck (1961). In the context of Beck’s writing, we will assume that the term refers to a sense of self that exists within a child before meaningful interaction with the outside world.

that are presented to the children in the Montessori classroom carry only one method of discovery, one could argue that that particular method is determined by the ideology of the economic system. Peter McLaren (2005), a contemporary critical pedagogue, argues that the core values of the education system demand that schools seek ways to produce new, flexible forms of human capital that can be utilized in the economy. Education reform shifts the methods that are used in schools in order to spur this new production. But the core values of the system do not change. The purpose of education remains as a vehicle to produce workers who are fit to effectively participate in the United States' workforce (McLaren 2005). One can connect Kilpatrick and McLaren across the century that divides their work through the idea that these methods of instruction—these learning tools—prepare and form the students to match the demands of the capitalist system.

The Montessori method preaches the development of the autonomous child, but in this Kilpatrick and McLaren line of thinking, the autonomous child of Montessori begins to look very similar to the subject of the Jeffersonian model. The autonomous child is the good citizen that the current Jeffersonian model seeks to produce. A similar process occurs with the use of democracy and democratic values in the public Montessori environment. The Montessori approach to democracy takes on an altered identity within the public setting.

Democracy and Montessori Education

Both the Montessori subject and the Jeffersonian subject are products of a democratic structure. Jefferson sought to create a democratic republic that would be ruled for the people, by the people. His education model was built to be the vehicle by which the next generation was instilled the participatory values, as well as basic skills and knowledge, that it needed to become the leaders and electorate the republic needed (Cox Jr. 2004; Carpenter 2013). It was founded to promote the democratic governance system.

The Montessori classroom "is a workplace democracy," (Williams and Keith 2000: 218). Researchers Nancy Williams and Rebecca Keith (2000) note that the practices of the Montessori classroom create an environment in which students participate and collaborate. Students move about the room with respect to the prepared order of it, but they are not restricted to any space or desk. They progress at their own pace, and the multi-aged setup of classrooms promotes their ability to help each other solve problems. The unobtrusiveness of teachers results in the development of student interdependence and resourcefulness (Williams and Keith 2000). All of the core components come together to create a democratic workplace in the classroom. Williams and Keith (2000) argue that the purpose of the Montessori education is to develop applied democratic sensibilities in children.

The democratic sensibility that they are speaking of is the children's belief in the importance of their participation in the classroom. In an article for the Virginia Law Review, Robert Post (2011)—Dean of Yale Law School—takes the position that democracy is not simply a method of decision-making. Participants' belief in their potential influence on the laws that rule them is imperative. "Democracy reflects a certain relationship between persons and their government," Post writes (2011: 482). The Jeffersonian model of education promotes this relationship by instilling participatory values, generally through repetition of the importance of participation, and by siphoning off the chosen intellectuals who will continue with higher education and become the leaders of the country (Carpenter 2013).

The Montessori method promotes it slightly differently. Montessori creates a space to act as a democratic workplace. Students are involved in the goings on of the classroom and interact daily with the look and feel of the ideal neoliberal democracy. They have the freedom to use the space as they please, learn through modes of self-governance, and are taught to value open and respectful collaboration based on their own knowledges. However, when the Montessori democratic space is applied in a public setting—so tied to the traditional Jeffersonian model—the space takes on new qualities.

The Montessori space is carefully curated. This means a few things. First, it means that the classroom itself is laid out, decorated, and organized particularly. It also

means that all of the learning materials in the classroom—workbooks, novels, knickknacks, animals, etc.—are specifically chosen for the students. Finally, it means that the basic rules of conduct within the classroom are stringent enough that no one gets hurt but loose enough to allow the students to feel relatively free. An example of this would be that students have to ask, often with specific hand signals, if they can go to the bathroom, but they may get up from their desks to wander about the room at any time. They have freedom to leave their desks, but they cannot leave the classroom without permission. In this carefully curated space, students are expected to learn through a series of discoveries and experiences. The teacher does a lot of work in the organization process but is expected to take a step back in the learning process.

This works well assuming that students are naturally inclined to follow the expected path. But what if some of them are not? Imagine that the class is taking a math quiz. Everyone is silently working at their desks, heads bent over papers and pencils scratching away. At some point, a girl—let us call her Leah—gets bored. She lowers her pencil and looks around the room. The giant snake in the far corner snatches her attention. Because there are no rules that require her to remain seated, Leah gets up and weaves through her focused peers to get to the snake. For a few minutes, she stands over the heated vivarium, watching the animal. When she finds herself bored once again, she heads back towards her desk. But halfway there, she decides to take a left and head

towards the bookcase. Her fingers lazily trace the spines of the well-loved novels, lingering on the titles that catch her attention.

After inspecting the bookcase, Leah makes her way back to her seat. A friend looks up, and their eyes meet over the heads of their peers. Leah does a little shimmy, and both girls begin to giggle. Mrs. Johnson—their teacher—looks up and shoots Leah a warning look. The girl seats herself back at her desk and reads through her quiz a few times, attempting to solve a problem or two. She then raises her hand. Leah has folded her fingers into the class's sign for the bathroom, and Mrs. Johnson nods in acknowledgement and consent. Happily, Leah hops up and skips out the door.

The Montessori democratic space is key to allowing the child to discover himself and create relationships with his peers. But Leah fails this math quiz. She does not fail it only because she decided to meander about the room instead of taking the quiz. She fails it because she never learned the information that she was being quizzed on. Surface area equations bore Leah, so when she was expected to learn how to use them to solve problems, she did not do it. Instead, she might have collaborated with friends to fill out her worksheets on surface area. Because she has failed this quiz, she now has to teach herself the current unit as well as work independently with the teacher or a tutor to learn the surface area unit. It sets her behind her peers who learned it originally, and if she does not catch up quickly, it can easily affect her test performance at the end of the year. If she tests poorly enough, she may not even be eligible to proceed to the next

grade. This is the politicization of Montessori. Even though the intended subject of Montessori is the autonomous, well-rounded individual, in the public setting, it can become part of maintaining national order. Montessori's isolating, student-led approach can subject students to the harsh values of neoliberalism. Those who cannot make it on their own will fall behind. In a private setting, falling behind may not affect the student's overall performance as much, as there are no determining tests at the end of the year. However, public schools are bound by accountability testing.

Conclusion

This chapter explores the changing form of Montessori education by focusing on the shifting notion of the subject of Montessori education. The first two waves of Montessori in the United States demonstrate how American Montessori inverted Dr. Maria Montessori's original foundation by changing the intended subject from marginalized children to children of the wealthy. This was due, in part, to the popular critiques of Kilpatrick who was a proponent of a more open form of inquiry for children. The third wave could imply a shift back towards the original subject, but when examined within the neoliberal public system in the United States, the method appears to be a more hands-on practice geared towards creating students who will be good fits for society. This chapter argues that the American Montessori subject is vulnerable to change depending on the needs of the education space that it is applied to.

Final Conclusion

Critical pedagogy, as Paulo Freire wrote (1972), was originally intended for the laboring peasantry. It was not located in a classroom setting. The goal was to introduce literacy and education to a group that had been deprived of it. So what might it look like in a classroom in 2019, particularly a Montessori classroom? What could it do? I use a definition of neoliberalism informed by Hardt and Negri (2004), Kalleberg (2011), and Klein (2014) to situate a modern public Montessori classroom. I then draw on what Montessori says about itself, and my own experiences, to piece together a fictive ethnography of critical pedagogical practices applied in the Montessori classroom. This brings me to the overall conclusion that by introducing critical practices to the Montessori environment, we essentially create a critical version of the Dewey education model.

Imagine this, the day is October 31—Halloween. It looks like a normal Wednesday. Students and teachers are not dressed in costume, and when they arrive at school, they settle into their typical routines and schedules. At their clustered desks, students finish worksheets and read silently. The morning is peaceful and quiet, waiting patiently for the class to shift into the first work cycle of the day. But instead of giving the students their instructions for the first work cycle, the teacher calls all of the students to the carpet in the center of the room.

The carpet lies at the heart of the classroom, directly in front of the whiteboard and surrounded by the clusters of desks. It is just big enough for all 25 students and their teacher to sit around its perimeter and see each other. The teacher, who we shall call Mr. Shelley, sits on a small stool so that he is part of the circle but slightly elevated—visually the clear facilitator of what is about to happen. Imagine that he sits on his little stool and waits for the small hands and feet around the carpet to settle before he speaks.

"So who here is dressing up or going trick-or-treating tonight?" he asks the group. Hands shoot up into the air, waving excitedly. "What are you going as?"

The first student that is called on tells the group that she will be going as a butterfly. Heads nod in appreciation around the carpet. A boy answers next. He will be a lion. This continues until every student that wishes to share has done so. And then Mr. Shelley says, "When is a costume silly? And when is it offensive?" As the students shared their costume ideas, the energy in the room grew and grew. But with this question, the bubble of excitement bursts, leaving 25 children deep in thought.

"I think if you're making fun of someone or their people, then it's not okay. Even if it's funny," the lion boy offers to the group. Heads nod. The room seems to agree.

A girl who has yet to contribute raises her hand. Mr. Shelley gestures for her to speak. "I think it's offensive to dress up as another person. You aren't them. You can't pretend to be them." Immediately, the room swells with energy. Hands are forgotten, and everyone begins to speak. Some agree with her, but many do not. Their words

tumble out over each other onto the carpet, wrestling to be heard. Mr. Shelley holds up a hand signal. The noise dies down, but students around the carpet squirm with the effort of containing their thoughts.

Imagine that Mr. Shelley reminds the students that part of sharing their thoughts and feelings around the carpet is listening to and respecting those of their peers. Rather than speak over each other, the students listen thoughtfully to whoever is speaking and formulate their own sentences in response. An intricately woven conversation builds around the carpet.

The schedule of the Montessori day is built around uninterrupted work cycles. For periods of 2-3 hours, students work quietly on learning activities. While they are allowed to work in small groups, often they work alone. Between the work cycles, there is generally solo time in which students spend around 15 minutes doing non-academic things like reading, knitting, or playing cards. Moments like this conversation around the carpet and whole-school morning meeting purposely draw students away from the isolation that the rest of their schedule requires. These are moments of community building that teach students to listen to each other's thoughts and feelings. When Mr. Shelley opens the floor for the students to discuss Halloween costumes, he is giving them time to discuss their own histories and experiences with each other, time to learn from each other.

These community-building moments do not have to be centered on holidays, and they do not have to exist completely separately from the typical day-to-day curriculum and learning activities. Picture a critical reading exercise that might be on a standardized test. Students read a short story or essay and then answer a series of questions that prompt an analysis of the passage. Exercises like this are important for students to practice before taking standardized tests in order to improve their scores. But they can also be opportunities for community building.

What if the activity was done out loud as a group? Not every time. But imagine if every once in a while, for particular essays or stories, the class analyzed the passage together. At Lakewood Montessori Middle School, the sixth grade is divided into two communities. Each community is split in half to make up the homerooms so that each homeroom has 25 students. The classroom is made up of two rooms that are separated by a retractable, translucent wall. One homeroom resides on one side of the wall and the other on the other side. Imagine pulling the wall back and opening the space up to its full size. Imagine if Ms. Taft—Mr. Shelley's co-teacher in his community—brought her students over to the other side of the classroom. Maybe her homeroom students would pile onto the carpet and slide into vacant desks, filling every empty space in Mr. Shelley's half of the room.

As they settle, the two teachers hand out the short stories and essays and instruct the students to first read the pieces silently to themselves. This silent reading allows

them the chance to process and reflect. Once the heads in the room begin to swivel about, eyes searching for other eyes or interesting posters on the wall, the two teachers begin to ask the full community questions about what they have read. Today's story is about a man who had always taken the proximity of his family for granted until one day, while helping his mother clean out the basement, he unearthed his great-grandfather's freedom papers. He finds it in an old safe that seems to hold all of the family's important documents. Ms. Taft asks the room if anyone has family members who act as a family historian. As children around the room are called on to tell their families' stories, everyone else listens patiently and intently. Every now and then, students ask their peers clarifying questions, and often, they connect their stories to ones that have already been told. "Jamie, my mom is our family historian too!" one may say to another before launching into a detailed description of how her mother scrapbooks.

Even Ms. Taft and Mr. Shelley participate in the conversation. They tell the students about how history looks in their families. "Why is history important?" Ms. Taft asks the community. The children ponder for a moment before raising their hands.

"Because it tells us where we come from," is one of the first answers.

"Why is it important to learn about other people's history?" Mr. Shelley adds.

"Because it tells us where they come from."

Due to the emphasis on standardized achievement tests, the public school environment cannot leave much room for flexibility within the curriculum. However,

small updates to common activities, like critical reading exercises, could create opportunities for community building as well as students' increased understanding of themselves and others. Paulo Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy movement was intended to liberate the peasant laborers from their oppression by arming them with the knowledge of their place in history—who they were and how they came to be oppressed by the unfair economic forces of capitalism. Scholars have recognized changes within the economy that have resulted in a change in the mechanisms of oppression, and contemporary followers of Freire, such as Noah De Lissovoy (2018), believe that the shift requires an update to critical pedagogy's traditional practices.

De Lissovoy (2018) writes that the neoliberal moment—marked by a retreat of social welfare, a retreat of government regulations on the corporate sector, and a focus on the free market (Klein 2014; Hardt and Negri 2004; Kalleberg 2011)—has resulted in a new form of oppression. The oppression of Freire's Brazil looked like the systematic oppression of an entire class, and he sought to educate individuals in order to arm the class for a revolution. The oppressed laboring class that De Lissovoy (2018) writes of is fragmented and atomized. Beginning with the withdrawal of government regulations on corporations resulted in the disintegration of trade unions. Workers' protections were removed, and people found themselves alone and subject to the free market as laborers, and only as laborers (Kalleberg 2011). Because the neoliberal moment systematically oppresses the isolated worker by taking away his community and making his job more

precarious, educating the individual can no longer be the critical practice (De Lissovoy 2018). Instead, the individual must be reintroduced to the collective.

No Child Left Behind was a policy that reinforced global neoliberal ideologies in schools. The policy was reflective of the national support of the free market in all arenas of life. By tying financial support to students' standardized test results, it not only flattened students' values to their scores but also created a system of profit maximization within public education. Policymakers wanted to ensure that their funds were being spent well and were solving the problems they were intended to solve. In order to do so, NCLB set up a system of punitive measures meant to incentivize teachers and schools to do whatever they could to increase test scores in their schools, ultimately introducing market forces to the traditional, Jeffersonian model of education.

Testing is also naturally isolating, especially if teachers feel the need to predominately utilize classroom activities that teach to the test. When students spend their days in a cycle of rote memorization, multiple choice problems, and math problems, it is difficult for them to connect a social characteristic to the material. I believe that in order to combat this flattened sense of learning and student identity, we must combine Montessori's philosophy, Dewey's model of the continuity of social life, and the practices of critical pedagogy.

The Montessori model looks like it could be naturally isolating and perpetuate the pressing issue of flattening in public schools, for so much of the school day is spent

in student-directed work cycles. However, Montessori education is generally built around three pillars—academics, community, and self. Everything in the school relates back to these pillars. Many Montessori classrooms even have visual reminders of the pillars somewhere in the room.

Imagine that a student, we might call her Margot, sits at her desk during a work cycle. As children do, she looks up from her work and lets her eyes scan the surrounding walls of the classroom. Handmade mobiles hang from the ceiling, dangling geometric shapes over her head, and black silhouettes are taped to the walls. The silhouettes are math projects, from the surface area project that Margot and her class did a few weeks ago. Each student outlined his or her silhouette and then measured the surface area by breaking the shadow into shapes. The projects displayed around the room change every time the students create something new for a unit. But one poster remains constant. The poster has three lines of script, "I will excel when success is expected and encouraged. I will contribute to the success of a peaceful community. I will strive to be a well-balanced and respectful individual." Every time Margot looks up at the whiteboard, her eyes are drawn to this poster. She memorized it a long time ago. Academics. Community. Self. These three pillars enforce the idea that every student is more than a test score; they impose a model of three-dimensional students.

The Montessori schedule revolves around individual learning, but it also leaves specific times for community building. In these gaps between the blocks of

individuality, like whole-school morning meeting, teachers engage students with practices that look similar to those of contemporary critical pedagogy. Because the pillar of community is one of the school's core values, teachers feel comfortable creating moments outside of the preset schedule to engage their students as a community. These are moments like the hypothetical communal critical reading activity and the Halloween discussion. They are organic moments of community.

As I explained through my discussion of the emergence of the Montessori method in the United States, American Montessori is not inherently political. It is a scientific method meant to improve student learning and development. It was utilized at first only in private schools because wealthy parents were looking for the best educational opportunities for their children, and they were not content with the public system. It was not used as a method to educate wealthy children to liberate themselves. Because the subject of the Montessori method is not political, I think of the method itself as being a neutral educational framework. Within a system of stringent educational reform that promotes the perpetuation of neoliberal isolation, this framework can easily be made into a tool of capitalist power. But if we can update the Montessori method by introducing critical practices in small moments, we can essentially create a liberating version of Dewey's exchange model.

To Kill a Mockingbird

When I was in 8th grade, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was everything. My copy was battered and loved; notes to myself, written in gel pen were crammed into the margins on every page. It came everywhere with me because my homework was to connect the book to my life, to see the themes and tropes played out so that I would understand them and could talk about them in class. It took us a whole semester to get through the book. I realize now that this experience, which looks strikingly similar to the practices of critical pedagogy, is one afforded by the price of a lofty private school tuition paid by my parents. Due to the rigid emphasis on standardized performance testing, most public school students do not get to spend a semester poring over and discussing every page of a novel. Among other freedoms, reflection and conversation about self and community are reserved for those who can afford them. But it does not have to be this way. At this moment, federal constraints on public education are loosening to accommodate a variety in educative techniques. We have a chance to rework these theories of Dewey, Montessori, Freire, and Jefferson and to fit them together. These patchwork practices will allow us to bring experiences to public school students that, in the past, only private school students have had access to.

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