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## Association Montessori International/USA Black History Month 2022



### How We Teach History is Just as Important as What We Teach A Word to Guides

“If we were to open any of the major history textbooks used in most schools in the United States, we would find an inaccurate account of American history that supports the notion that European immigrants settled our country. In this version of history, the definition of a true American is narrow and people of color or non-Christians are not a part of the national identity. People of other races are either pushed outside of the historical narrative, completely left out of the accounts, or their contributions are minimized because they are deemed inferior or different.” (Takaki, 2012)

**As we approach American history that includes the stories of Africans and their descendants, we must also remember that how we teach history is just as important as what we teach.** According to social theorist Jurgen Habermas, *“American history curricula, as typically taught, supports biases and racism ...knowledge acquired in school-or anywhere, for that matter-is never neutral or objective but is ordered and structured in particular ways”*. In his view, there are three domains of human knowledge, and we will gain different knowledge depending on the domain used.

When using the **technical approach** to teaching history, just the facts are given. Names, events, and dates are spewed and requires children to do no more than memorize information that is not typically connected in any meaningful form or fashion. Giving undisputable details does not necessarily mean being unbiased or value-free. By the careful choice of what facts to include or exclude, it is possible to construct arguments that can be wholly one-sided yet can be asserted to “fit the facts.” Book passages and written lessons that are “factually correct” may also be communicating very selective values and moral judgments. This form of bias is subtler than is bias resulting from inaccurate facts, but it can still be very powerful. (McIsaac, 1996). This is usually not the approach taken in Montessori classrooms.





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The **practical approach** to teaching history is frequently used in the Montessori world. A few facts or keys are given, research or further exploration is typically involved. Once the exploration is complete, the “research” is written and the presentation is given, we don’t ask the children to dig deeper because the outcome has been achieved. (Mclsaac, 1996).

The **Emancipatory approach** to teaching history helps the guide and the child identify 'self-knowledge' through self-reflection. The child is taught to ask if the factual assertions are true and if so, what is/was the aftermath of those historical actions? Insights gained through critical self-awareness are emancipatory in the sense that at least the correct reason for the historical problem is revealed. When children gain greater understanding, their consciousness is awakened. (Mclsaac, 1996).

This approach facilitates “lightbulb” moments. American enslavement of African people begs for use of the emancipatory approach because there is historical evidence and documented social and cultural impact from 1619 up to today. Literally, every generation of White and African people in America have been impacted, positively or negatively, by the Trans-Atlantic trade.

**When we as guides pose the emancipatory questions of ourselves and to our students, we are teaching for universal liberation.** This domain will help children develop knowledge of human culture, give language that allows for better communication in our America, facilitate the development of the reasoning mind, facilitate the development of a moral compass that supports good judgment and more harmonious relationships, and give greater experience and knowledge to move about in the community.

**Using an emancipatory approach is scary and uncomfortable and hard, however,** it does prepare children to grapple with the myths and realities of U.S. history. Some will resist this approach, therefore, “you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom, but also in society, you will (may) meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won’t happen. **(Baldwin, 1963)** Finally, using an emancipatory model challenges *all* teachers to understand our American history, even the most tragic and inhumane parts. It may require that we do some research, study, and learn and get up close to aspects of American history that we have never examined

History, the study of how the past has shaped our current existence, is the pillar of the Montessori educational approach for children 6-12 years of age known as “Cosmic Education.” History continues to be important for adolescents and Montessori educators are tasked with skillfully guiding them to critically examine the narratives of history. The stories of people with different contexts, different experiences, and different perspectives provide the tapestry within which adolescents weave their own unique identities, shape their own future, and develop empathy, dignity, and a sense of justice. Montessori





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pedagogy is used to inform educators to contemplate how to guide children honestly and effectively. This includes offering guidance about the concepts of race and justice and the infusing the great contributions that African Americans have made to this nation. (AMI/USA, CRT, 2022) It is long overdue, and despite the fierce and erroneous backlash about Critical Race theory, it is still quite necessary that all educators “pledge to teach the truth” (Zinn, 2021)

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