

Black and Latino Parents’ Experience of Public Montessori Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Public Montessori schools are notable for the racial and economic diversity of their students. In 2013, 61% of 300 school-wide Montessori schools enrolled between 20-80% minority students, and a further 19% enrolled 80-100% minority students. In these 300 school-wide Montessori programs alone, there were 44,202 black and Latino students in 2012-13 (Debs 2015).¹

We know little about the specific experience of families of color after they enroll in public Montessori schools. Prior research has examined how much public Montessori parents understand the Montessori curriculum (Murray 2008, Zarybniski 2010), but with little emphasis on parent’s racial background.

In addition, there have been several high profile instances of black and Latino parents organizing **against** public Montessori in San Francisco and Santa Cruz, California, Memphis, Tennessee and Charleston, South Carolina (Benham 2010, Bowers 2013, Burnette, Shapiro 2013.).

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the experiences of black and Latino parents in public Montessori schools?

Why might some black and Latino parents perceive public Montessori to be incompatible with their educational goals? How can these criticisms be addressed?

RESEARCH SITES

Birch and Vine Montessori magnet schools (both pseudonyms) are PreK3 to 6th grade schools located in Hartford, Connecticut. They are part of a system of inter-district magnet schools which enroll roughly 50% suburban students alongside 50% Hartford students.

In 2013-14, both schools enrolled approximately 75% students of color.

Both schools have high levels of Montessori implementation and have long waiting lists for student enrollment. They also conducted extensive parent education on Montessori throughout the year.

METHODS

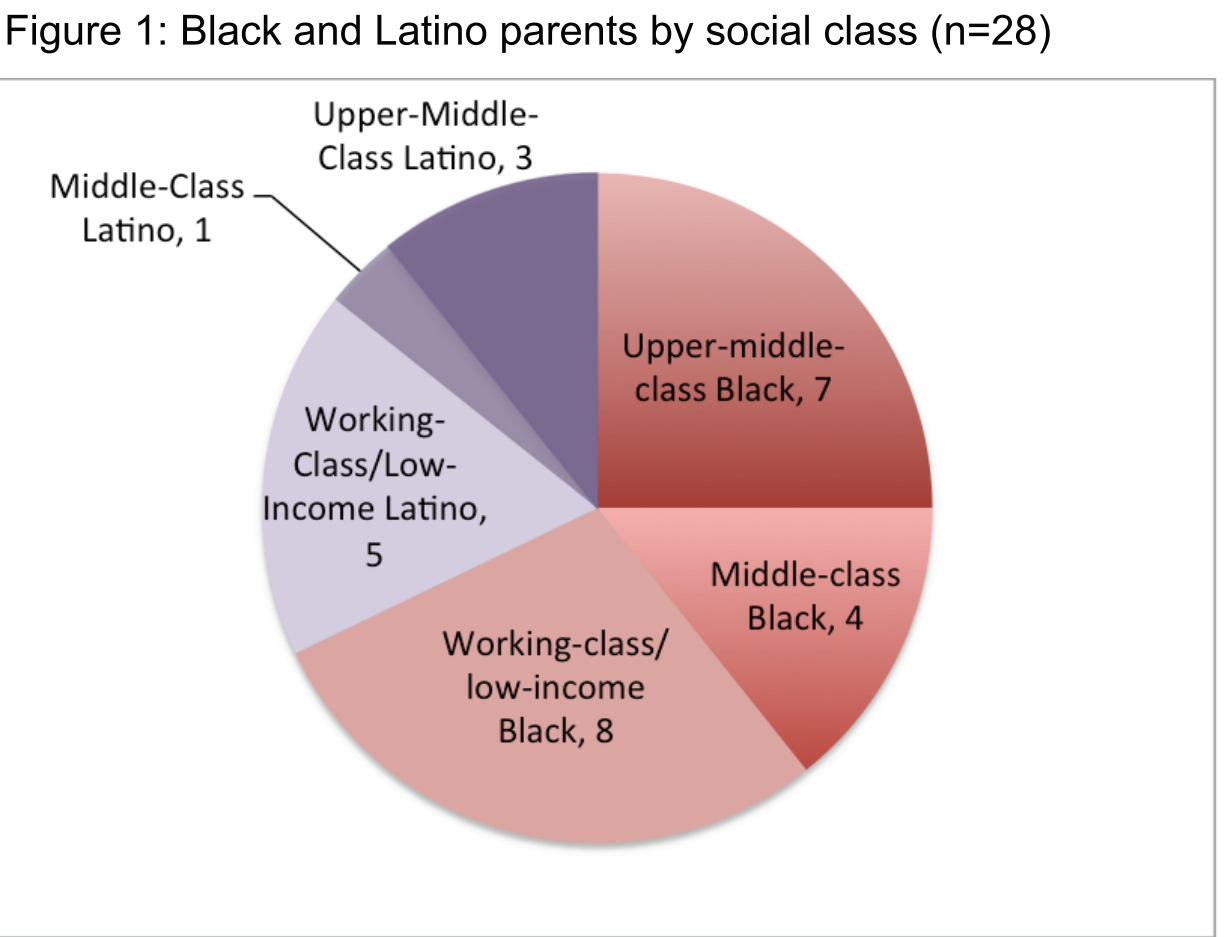
My research used qualitative methods including 260 hours of participant observation of the parent communities at Birch and Vine Montessori magnet schools, interviews with 50 parents and 28 staff and policy makers.

I interviewed 50 parents (43 parents from 31 families randomly selected by a random number generator, and 7 parents involved in the PTO.)² Interviews took place at the interviewee’s home, at school or a nearby coffee shop.

I asked open-ended questions about the school choice process, how parents chose their current school, their daily experience at the school and understanding of the curriculum, their attendance at school events, the extent of their social connection to other parents, and whether they thought about leaving the school. I also collected demographic information including race/ethnicity, income, religious affiliation, education, job, and job prior to immigration.

Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and coded for emerging themes using grounded theory (Glazer and Strauss 1967).

For this analysis, I focus on a subset of **28 black and Latino parents**. Figure 1 shows that these parents represented a socioeconomically diverse group.³



FINDINGS

Many black and Latino parents I interviewed were **strong advocates** for Montessori.

Parents valued:
“...that **strong sense of community**...and that the kids are just happy”
“I could see she was empowered, because **she became a leader**.”

Others experienced Montessori as a “**conflicted fit**.” 46% (13 out of 28) black and Latino parents from all social class backgrounds appreciated some Montessori practices but found others alienating.

In contrast only 4 out of 17 white parents I interviewed felt “conflicted.”

Academic expectations were the biggest areas of concern. 46% (13 out of 28) black and Latino parents told me that some aspects of Montessori’s “follow the child” ran counter to their sense of educational urgency.

Their personal experience reflected a belief that they needed to work harder to overcome a legacy of discrimination, or what one black parent called “**making up for history**.”

Some black and Latino parents also shared a “**utility-focused approach**” (Lewis-McCoy 2014) to education, emphasizing skills and outcomes, which contrasted with their perception that Montessori was “**abstract education**,” focused on holistic outcomes like a love of learning.

They worried:
“[My son] is **too comfortable**.”
“Knowing my daughter, she’ll do good, but I think sometimes she needs a little more push, because I think she can do more.”

“As much as I do love the program, my child still has to compete on a national level.”

“At the younger ages [Montessori is] beyond excellent, your child tends to grow in leaps and bounds, but I think it levels out at a certain point and then they start to not only level out, to be a little bit below their peers.”

- 4 of my interviewees wanted **homework** for their children and asked for it from their children’s teachers, despite the fact that it was against school policy.

- Several interviewees were considering pulling their children after being told they would need to spend a **fourth year in primary**.

- Several interviewees were concerned about the emphasis on **gardening** taking away from academic preparation.

Though these interviews only measured parental perception and not student performance, both schools had significant racial achievement gaps beginning with state testing in 3rd grade.

Footnotes

1.The National Center for Educational Statistics does not collect data on programs within schools, so I do not have demographics on the remaining 203 public Montessori programs
2. I contacted 50 randomly selected families, 25 at each school. My response rate was 80% at Vine Montessori, and 44% at Birch Montessori where I had limited access to parent contact information and relied on an administrator to do the outreach for me. I called each household at least three times, and sent a letter and multiple e-mail messages to schedule an interview. Two parents declined to be interviewed outright.
3.Though social class backgrounds are complex, in general, I considered parents upper-middle-class if their salary was above \$100,000, middle-class if their salaries were between \$50,000 to \$100,000 and they had a college degree or higher and working-class/low-income if they had an associate’s degree or less and/or earned less than \$50,000 a year (Lacy 2007).

DISCUSSION/POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These interviews represent preliminary findings from a small sample. Further research is needed to determine if these findings are generalizable to black and Latino parents in other public Montessori parent communities.

Still, these findings raise questions about the extent to which black and Latino parents from all social class backgrounds perceive Montessori to be effective for their children.

Rather than concluding that parents with a “utility-focused approach” are not a “good fit” for Montessori, here are some other strategies that Montessori educators are using at their schools:

- Talk explicitly about a school’s academic achievement and student outcomes to prospective and current parents.
- If there are racial achievement gaps, discuss them and the strategies underway to improve them.
- Acknowledge the value and social context of parents who have a “utility-focused approach” to education.
- Allow parents to disagree with parts of the Montessori pedagogy and still feel welcome at the school.
- Participate in an anti-racism training to develop an awareness of how historical legacies of racism interact with education.
- Facilitate an honest and open conversation with school staff/the broader Montessori community about what works well for students of color and what needs to be supplemented to ensure the success of all students.
- Encourage research to study the efficacy of Montessori for students of color.

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