INTRODUCTION

Public Montessori schools are notable for their 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 44,022 black and Latino students in 2012-13 (Debs 2015).

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, Zaryanski 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 from poverty.

Both schools have high levels of Montessori educational accomplishment and have long waiting lists for students 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.) Interviews took place at the interviewee’s home, at school or a nearby coffee shop.

FINDINGS

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

Parents valued: “the 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 interviewees only measured parental perception and not student performance, both schools had significant racial achievement gains beginning with state testing in 3rd grade.

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