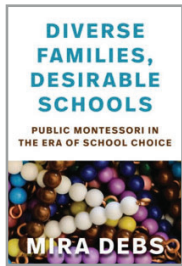


Is Montessori Really for Everyone?

By Angela Murray, PhD



Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice

By Mira Debs

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In *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice*, Dr. Mira Debs examines the history, promise, and challenges of Montessori in U.S. public education. Debs, the director of the Education Studies program at Yale University, played an instrumental role in the founding of Montessori for Social Justice. In this book, she relies on extensive historical and ethnographic research to, as she says in the preface, “show what the Montessori movement has accomplished in creating racially and economically diverse schools of choice, and also highlight the work that remains to be done” (p. xvi). This work is a must-read for those committed to increasing access to Montessori for more children through public education. While obvious challenges associated with expanding racial and socioeconomic diversity in Montessori include transportation, subsidized meals, and limited access to lottery information, this book exposes complex additional issues, such as balancing the requirements of programmatic fidelity; managing potential gentrification when programs gain popularity, attracting middle-class families; and, finally, addressing family “fit.”

Most Montessorians are likely to know well the history of Maria Montessori and her work with disadvantaged children in Rome, but a retelling is necessary for the book’s broader audience. Debs also provides fascinating lesser-known details, including information on people of color who were important contributors to the Montessori Movement. They are not well recognized, Debs explains, because the “history of people of color in the United States is often hiding in plain sight” (p. 50). [See the next page for an excerpt from the book, which tells the compelling story of one of these individuals, Mae Arlene Gadpaille.]

In addition to providing context for how public Montessori reached the point where it is today, this book also outlines key challenges that stand in the way of true diversity in public Montessori education. One challenge is balancing the requirements of programmatic fidelity with the realities of the diverse communities we wish to serve. Fidelity concerns can limit access to public pre-K programs that begin at age 4,

when enrollment is restricted to children who had prior Montessori experience (which often requires tuition). Furthermore, the limited availability of teacher education programs serves to restrict the diversity of individuals who choose to pursue Montessori teacher training, homogenizing the faces of Montessori teachers.

As Montessori schools experience success and gain popularity, Debs says, overly enthusiastic white and middle-class students can crowd out the very communities public Montessori schools were designed to serve. Stories of schools who have wrestled with these challenges are fascinating reading, because the author humanizes the struggle of everyone involved.

Debs illustrates the complexities of family feelings of “fit” within Montessori schools. While she characterizes some families as “true believers,” who make significant sacrifices because they are committed to Montessori, many other families are simply “satisfied” or even “conflicted” about their children’s enrollment in Montessori schools. And the “satisfied” group identified more with the fact that their children attended a magnet school than the fact the school was Montessori. Even though these families were not necessarily aligned with Montessori philosophy, Debs found that they recognized the impact the Montessori program was having on their children.

“Conflicted” families remain in public Montessori programs due to a dearth of other alternatives, but they have mixed feelings about the lack of homework and “following the child” rather than pushing students academically. These were more often families of color, frequently middle and upper-middle class. They often appreciated the respect and social development of Montessori, relative to other surrounding schools, as well as the fostering of self-discipline and independence. However, they worried that their children would not be able to compete in more traditional environments as they got older. While we hear these concerns from white families as well, Debs explains that “for many Black and Latinx families I interviewed, the anxiety was compounded by a familial history of limited educational opportunities and their awareness of the discrimination their children would face in the future” (p. 117). Communication from Montessori schools can reinforce this idea, because the message often revolves around more abstract, whole-child notions, which do not resonate with families of color.

Debs concludes the book by outlining best practices for equitable and diverse public Montessori schools, including family engagement. These recommendations guide Montessorians in their efforts to realize the promise of public Montessori. By highlighting the personal aspirations and multifaceted concerns of diverse families, this book may dispel misconceptions and oversimplifications about serving families of color in public Montessori schools. Debs has crafted a book with much to teach Montessorians about creating racially and socioeconomically diverse educational communities. This book also represents a significant opportunity to share lessons from public Montessori with the broader population that wishes to ensure that progressive schools of choice live up to their potential for enhancing the lives of children of color.

AN EXCERPT FROM *DIVERSE FAMILIES, DESIRABLE SCHOOLS: PUBLIC MONTESSORI IN THE ERA OF SCHOOL CHOICE*

In 1964, Mae Arlene Gadpaille, a Howard University graduate, used a \$20,000 Ford Foundation grant to open the Montessori Family Center in a parochial school basement in Boston's predominantly Black Roxbury neighborhood. In a *Boston Globe* Sunday Magazine feature, the school was described as a "a scrubbed oasis," in a neighborhood of vacant lots and empty buildings, overseen by Gadpaille, "an angel priestess in red oxfords and a blue smock." The religious comparison was fitting. Gadpaille, a former nun, discovered Montessori in college and was trained by fellow Catholic Nancy McCormick Rambusch, the founder of the American Montessori Society. Just as Gadpaille viewed her Catholic conversion in 1949 as reclaiming "a vanished dignity [as a] second-class citizen" in America, she similarly embraced Montessori's potential to transform the Black community. She explained to journalists, "My job is to wake up America, and we can, if we wake up every child under six."

Though she started her teaching career at private, predominantly White Montessori schools, including Rambusch's Whitby School, and as the founding director of Lexington Montessori School, Gadpaille's Montessori Family Center was designed for Roxbury's working-class Black families, offering full-day year-round childcare with half of the children attending tuition free through Head Start funding.

Gadpaille had ambitious visions. While still recuperating from a heart attack, she mobilized neighbors from her hospital bed to build a community playground when the city refused. In 1968, building off of Montessori's great lessons on the origin of humans, she sponsored a trip to Africa for twenty of her preschoolers along with their families. "The children say that everyone in the world is African, because we all came from Africa." Reflecting on the potential power of the trip on the developing cultural identity of Black children, she anticipated, "They're going to be 10 feet tall when they get back. They're going to sell Africa to everyone." She went on TV and radio to promote Montessori around the country.

Gadpaille envisioned a community of 150 Black-owned homes centered around a Montessori school serving ages birth to 18, and she recruited famed architect R. Buckminster Fuller, noted for his space-age geodesic domes, who skipped part of his Harvard reunion to volunteer the design. The *Boston Globe* called it a modern day "Black Brook Farm," after the eighteenth-century

Transcendentalist utopian community based in nearby West Roxbury. Fuller was attracted to Gadpaille's charisma. "She is one of the people who should be backed in every way.... I only hope the world catches on to her." The only hitch was the three-million-dollar price tag.

Gadpaille held fundraiser after fundraiser, \$50-a-plate dinners, African fashion shows, and a student performance of an original African musical at Boston's Symphony Hall. She served as both director and janitor for her school and went to Washington to lobby for Head Start funding. But despite Gadpaille's vision and unrelenting effort, the planned Black utopian Montessori community never came to fruition. Her school had to relocate four times, displaced by urban renewal programs that demolished the first location, and it remained on shaky financial footing throughout. Through dint and persistence, the Montessori Family Center remained open until 1990 when Gadpaille retired at age 85. In contrast, the predominantly White Lexington Montessori School that Gadpaille helped to open in 1963 continued expanding on a large campus in Lexington and remains open today. Mae Arlene Gadpaille was inspired by the way in which Montessori education could transform the lives of Black children living in poverty. Yet despite Ford Foundation grants, "starchitects" and national media attention, Gadpaille wasn't able to access enough capital to realize her full vision.

If you've never heard of Mae Arlene Gadpaille before, you aren't alone. She and a number of pioneering Montessori educators of color have been almost entirely undocumented in the broader Montessori history, though stories about their efforts appeared in national newspapers like the *Boston Globe* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Montessori audiences, even teachers of color, are often surprised to learn this history, though it represents another instance of the way in which the history of people of color in the United States is often hiding in plain sight. Gadpaille was one of a number of pioneering Montessori educators of color I discovered in the archives whose story complicates the perception that Montessori has been a predominantly White movement.

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