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Molly Schofield
Trinity College

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Increasing Interracial Relationships

Molly Schofield
Educational Studies Senior Research Project
Trinity College
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Whether interracial relationships change with the arrangement of time throughout a day at a Montessori Magnet School is a topic of concern that I have been interested in investigating due to several factors related to my career at Trinity College. My own coursework at Trinity College has remained focused on education within Hartford, specifically in relation to racial relationships. This interest extends into my own investment at the Montessori Magnet School in Hartford, Connecticut as an employee of their aftercare program for over a year and a half. Because of this interest, the potential for interracial relationships to change with the arrangement of time throughout a day at a Montessori Magnet School is a topic of high curiosity for myself.

Montessori schools and magnet schools are both common enough in the immediate area and throughout the country, but it is highly unusual that the two are combined as a schooling unit. The particular school where I investigated my research question is located across the street from Trinity College in the celebrated Learning Corridor. The Montessori Magnet School's function is as a state public magnet school. Many Montessori schools in general are private, but as a public school it means that there is no tuition charge to parents and as a magnet, it draws children in from the surrounding suburban areas as well as from Hartford itself (Montessori Magnet School, 1). Currently, the school's composition includes fifty percent of the student body from Hartford and fifty percent from the greater Hartford school districts (Montessori Magnet School, 1).

This particular school is unusual in that it is grouped with children ages three through twelve who are then arranged in age clusters by classrooms. However, this is common of Montessori schools. Each classroom is broken down and composed of either children at the primary level with three through six year olds, the lower elementary level with six through nine year olds, or the upper elementary level with nine through twelve year olds (Montessori Magnet School, 1). The students ideally stay with one teacher for this three year cycle at the primary, lower elementary, and upper elementary before progressing to the next level.

The school itself, as it is Montessori based, is grounded on the teachings of Maria Montessori. She is the inspiration for the school itself as well as other Montessori schools within the country and internationally. The Montessori philosophy she promoted is that, “children naturally learn through specific materials presented by the teacher, student choice and a careful development of concrete to abstract concepts in the academic and social areas” (Montessori, 154). In theory, the teacher basically acts as a guide to facilitate learning in several areas, while at the same time allowing the child to investigate materials and information at her or his own leisure. This is a unique aspect to Montessori schools and allows for a more child-centered approach to learning.

My own experience at the Montessori Magnet School has been primarily focused on the Montessori Magnet School’s aftercare program which is composed of students at the lower and upper elementary levels who range in age from six through twelve. There is not a formalized training program on teaching in the Montessori method for the employees of the aftercare program, but an overview workshop is required of employees to better understand philosophy and values that are adhered to in the school itself. While

my own experience does not create a bias within my observations, it is important to note that I am familiarized with the school and its functions as well as with teachers and staff within the school. Again, there is no bias created, but as an observer I am aware that I bring outside opinions that might not be present in an individual who is researching without the previous outside knowledge.

Existing research literature that is available relating to my topic of research does not relate directly to a Montessori-theme magnet school. The literature does not include information combining and concerning a magnet school that is a Montessori-theme, and it was difficult to find material directly related to this combined topic. There was ample information available concerning the presence and progress of magnet schools as well as information pertaining to desegregation and ways for which schools to facilitate interracial relationships among the student body. The existing literature also included information directly pertaining to Montessori schools and their ability to promote quality relationships with the students at the schools across economic and social barriers. Despite this existing information, there is no available literature or knowledge that concerns both Montessori and magnet schools together in contributing to interracial relationships for students.

Magnet schools, originally, were a concept that were intended to foster desegregation.

“Magnet schools are public schools with specialized curricula designed to attract particular students from throughout a school district. They are often part of an urban district’s desegregation program, intended to bring together students of different races” (Nathan, 7).

This is no different from the Montessori Magnet School, which was promoted to meet these goals as well.

Despite this, and while approaching my research question, interracial relationships within a Montessori-theme magnet school were of particular interest to me as they were in direct correlation with the statements which were made by many of the governing bodies within the Montessori Magnet School in Hartford, Connecticut. The governing body of both the Learning Corridor, and specifically the Montessori Magnet School, is the Capitol Region Education Council. The Capitol Region Education Council makes many of the governing policies that concern and involve the Montessori Magnet School. Among these policies includes the statement that one of their goals, “is to assist school districts in their efforts to reduce racial...isolation of Greater Hartford” (Choice Programs, 1). This statement directly addresses the issue of race that is concerned in the Hartford public school system and how the Capitol Region Education Council is making it a point to combat this racial isolation. The Montessori Magnet School states in their mission that, “Supported by teachers trained to enhance social interaction, children are encouraged to build strong relationships” (Multi-Age Groupings, 1). This is a direct statement that indicates that the teachers hired at this school are trained to aid and enhance the students in their typical interactions to make these interactions as diverse and meaningful as possible. Montessori schools, in general, also ask for this from their teachers, and it is outlined as such in their training process to become Montessori teachers. Specifically it is stated in coursework that they receive while receiving this training, “The way we [teachers] do things is always aimed to help the child get along with peers” (Hilsdon, 2). This would also support the statement made by the Montessori

Magnet Schools previously that teachers are in fact a catalyst for positive social interactions between students within the classrooms. Ideally, these statements all highlight the social and racial interaction that is likely to occur at the Montessori Magnet School. Because of this, the Montessori Magnet School seems to be a place where interracial interactions would be encouraged on some level among the children.

The research methods which I employed to investigate my research question included my own observations in a lower elementary classroom composed of children ages six through nine. After receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board at Trinity College to conduct my observations, I discussed my topic of research as well as my observations with the principal of the Montessori Magnet School, Mr. Nee. After discussion, I was placed for observations in one classroom at the Montessori Magnet School to conduct my research. Observation in only one classroom makes it difficult to generalize to the school as a whole, but I chose to continue to do just that, as the principal thought this classroom was representative of the Montessori Magnet School as a whole. The class was supervised and run by a White male teacher and a Hispanic woman aid. While this does not directly relate to my observations, it is useful in understanding the composition of the classroom setting under which I conducted observations. There were generally nineteen students on any given day, although this number fluctuated. The class was composed of Black, Hispanic, and White students. On average, during the days that I observed, sixty-two point one percent of the class was Black, ten point eight percent of the class was Hispanic, and twenty-seven percent of the class was White. These percentages are representative of the actual numbers of students within the classroom

who ranged in composition of anywhere between eleven to twelve Black students, two to three Hispanic students, or four to five White students on any given day of observations.

While I was observing and recording in the classroom, the children did not speak to me or seem distracted by my presence. There was no verbal interaction or physical interaction between myself and the students. The lack of interaction was actually surprising to me, as I knew many of the children from the aftercare program, and I had been certain that at least a few of the children would be distracted by my presence. I was told that my presence was explained beforehand by the teacher and because of this the children left me alone to do my “schoolwork.” It was also explained that since the concept of a Montessori-theme magnet school is novel, and that the progress of the school is constantly being evaluated, that the children are not distracted by observers as they are quite used to the presence of outsiders in their room. This was quite beneficial to my study as I did not have to gauge my observations by the amount of chaos that I caused within the classroom.

Before entering the classroom for observations, I made detailed charts that recorded several maps of the classroom to make data recording smoother and more expedient. When recording, I would first title the time structure within which the interactions were occurring. Under this, I would then record the location and race of each child and the race of each child with whom each child was interacting with.

For non-verbal activities, interactions included who the child was physically in proximity with. This proximity was defined as and included those who were located directly in front of, behind, to the left, and to the right of each student. For verbal activities, this included who the child was dialoguing with or participating

interdependently in an activity with. For verbal activities, there was no child who was positioned in the non-verbal activity criteria or creating confusion as to what constituted interaction between the verbal and non-verbal activities. I did not account for simple or complex interactions, but included all interactions as one for purposes of the observations that I hoped to see.

The data set that I compiled included observations from four separate days of observations which each lasted for three hours. From this, there was a total of twelve hours of observations that I included in my data. After compiling the twelve hours of observations together, I then arranged all blocks of time within the twelve hours into the same data set. I did this in order to ensure that all similar activities were arranged together for analysis. From this, I then ranked the blocks of time in order of activities that were high in teacher structured to activities that were low in teacher structure. Within each of these categories, the data was also broken down into racial interactions for each racial group of Black students, Hispanic students, and White students.

The categories that were broken into high teacher structure to low teacher structure included class activities, assigned formations, teacher-directed time, video watching, chosen formations, lunch, and snack. For purposes of accurate observations, I completely eliminated the category of recess because the interactions were occurring too rapidly to record all of the students and all of their interactions. "Class Activities" included any activity that occurred during traditional learning time throughout the day. Although the entire class was not participating in any one activity, all students were engaged in one activity or another. The types of activities included, among other things, counting with beads, mapping state facts, forming word activities, and recording the

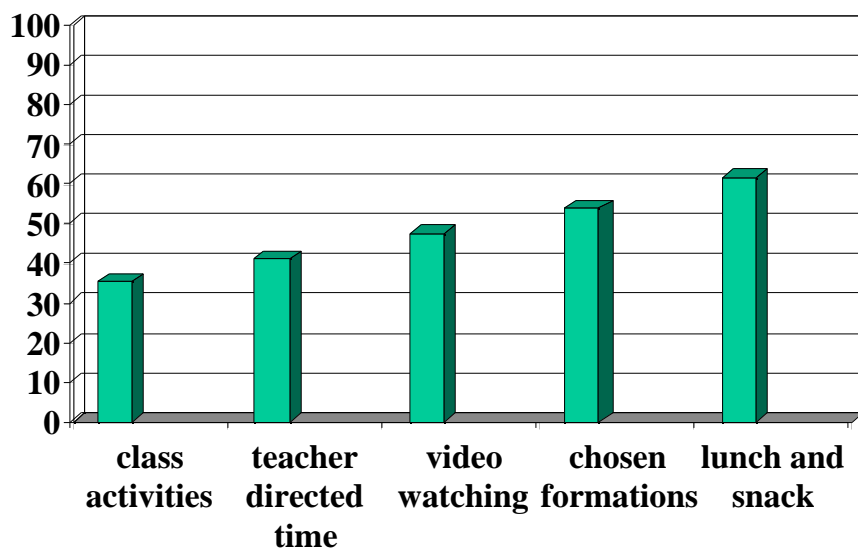
histories of the presidents. “Assigned formations” included any instance where children were dispersed into assigned positions in a line, assigned positions in relation to seating, or assigned arrangement within several class pictures that were taken throughout the course of my observations. “Teacher-directed time” included the teacher directly instructing the students as a whole population or class. This time frame was not as highly structured as the previous times because there was little one on one interaction between the teacher and the students. During this time period the teacher was simply addressing the classroom as a whole body. The teacher was not as involved, but was more focused on ideas rather than student tasks. This included the teacher reading to the entire class, playing the guitar for the entire class, or instructing the whole classroom about their Canadian pen pals. “Video watching” entailed the students watching movies. There was various teacher and student interaction, but this interaction was rare to little. “Chosen formations” includes the same formations that are listed above as assigned formations, but chosen formations included those that were chosen by the student and not assigned by the teacher. “Lunch and snack,” are combined into one category due to a small data sample and are for all purposes of observation and composition the same activity. Lunch and snack had a slightly less teacher involvement level than chosen formations as there was no influence on seating positions and the engaged activity of eating was significantly more casual and unrelated to the teacher than the previous categories.

After analyzing and compiling the data, I eliminated the category of Assigned Formations for several reasons. While it is ranked in high teacher structure, there was not strict correspondence to the location of where a child was asked to place herself or himself within a formation and where the child actually ended up placing herself or

himself. When the children formed lines, there was a high instance of allowing friends to sneak in front of or behind a child in these lines as well as switching their positions to elsewhere when the teacher was not paying attention. Because of this, I felt that the assigned formations were inaccurate and eliminated this category as it was not an accurate representation of what it claimed to measure. I was left with the categories of class activities, teacher-directed time, video watching, chosen formations, and lunch/snack.

After compiling this data, my thesis became that as the time arrangements at a Montessori-theme magnet school become more teacher-structured, interracial interactions decrease among students. The data that supports this can be viewed by racial category in the attached Graph One, Graph Two, and Graph Three. It can be viewed in these graphs that the individual races are not compared against one another, but are simply broken down into these racial categories in order for the given information to be more clearly readable.

Graph 1: Percentage of Black Students Interacting Interracially



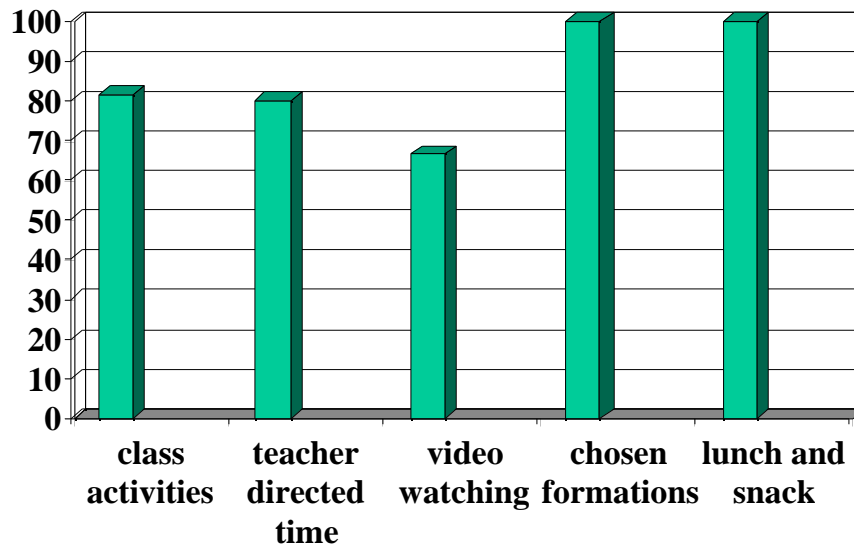
After viewing the graph that illustrates Black student interracial interactions it can be seen that as an activity becomes more teacher-structured, interracial interactions decrease. Interracial interactions are the previously defined interactions that occur among students of one race interacting with the students of the other races represented in the classroom. For the Black students in Graph 1, this would refer to their interaction with either Hispanic or White students within the classroom.

The data is presented to find that during the category of class activities, thirty-five point nine percent of Black students were interacting interracially. In teacher-directed time, a less teacher-structured activity, this number of Black students interracially interacting increased to forty one point six percent. During video watching, an even less teacher-structured activity, the percent of Black students interracially interacting increased to forty seven point six percent. The percentage of Black students interacting interracially during chosen formations, a less structured activity than the others, was fifty four point one percent. During lunch and snack, the least structured activity, the percentage of Black students interacting interracially reached a high of sixty two percent. There is an increase of interracial interactions among Black students from thirty five point nine percent to sixty two percent at the Montessori Magnet School as the activities become less teacher-structured.

The data for Hispanic students is not as supportive of this statement, as there is not a large Hispanic population within the classroom as a whole. On the majority of the days that I observed, there were only two Hispanic students in the classroom. Because of this and as applied to the definition of interracial interactions that I used in my

observations, it was difficult for Hispanic students not to interact interracially. For non-verbal interactions this was exceptionally difficult because there was generally at least two other students who would be considered interacting with the Hispanic student being observed. If there were only two Hispanic students in the classroom, they would have to be recorded as interracially interacting by default because of the sheer numbers of Hispanic students in the classroom.

Graph 2: Percentage of Hispanic Students Interacting Interracially



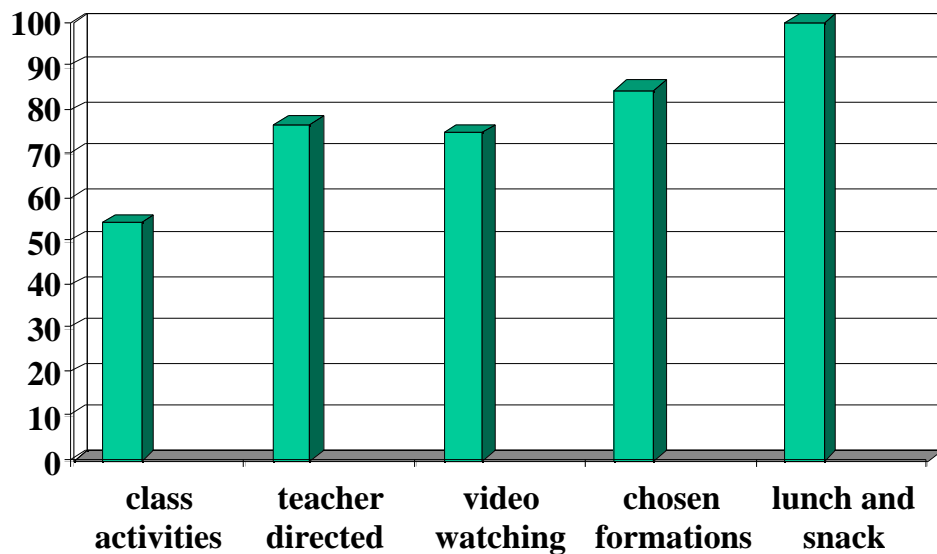
However, as it would be inaccurate to eliminate the data for Hispanic students completely, and because of this, the following data is what was observed. During the category of class activities, eighty one point six percent of Hispanic students were interacting interracially. In teacher-directed time, a less teacher-structured activity, this number of Hispanic students interracially interacting was eighty percent. During Video watching, an even less teacher-structured activity, the percent of Hispanic students interracially interacting decreased to sixty six point six percent. The percentage of Hispanic students interacting interracially during chosen formations, a less structured

activity than the others, was one hundred percent. During lunch and snack, the least structured activity, the percentage of Hispanic students interacting interracially was also one hundred percent. As can be observed in this data, there is little by means of comparison as the actual numbers of Hispanic students represented in the classroom was only two or three students. These averages do not coordinate with the data for the other racial categories and in order to gain more accurate data, it would be necessary to conduct observations in a classroom with a more representative Hispanic population.

Despite this, the White students, a more represented racial group, had trends similar to those of Black students. During the category of class activities, fifty four point five percent of White students were interacting interracially. In teacher-directed time, a less teacher-structured activity, this number of White students interracially interacting increased to seventy seven percent. During Video watching, an even less teacher-structured activity, the percent of White students interracially interacting was a slightly smaller, but similar percentage of seventy five percent. The percentage of White students interacting interracially during chosen formations, a less structured activity than the others, was eighty five percent. During lunch and snack, the least structured activity, the percentage of White students interacting interracially reached a high of one hundred percent. Unlike the Black students data, there is a slight discrepancy in the data with regards to the category of video watching. The number is slightly smaller, rather than larger than, the category before that is more teacher-structured. However, it is also significant that the percentage is off by two points, which could be the difference of one student within the data. Despite this, there is an increase of interracial interactions among White students from fifty four point five percent to one hundred percent at the

Montessori Magnet School as the activities become less teacher-structured. Because of this, at this particular classroom at the Montessori Magnet School interracial interactions increase as teacher-structure decreases. There is less interracial interaction occurring between students of different races the more involved a teacher is with the presented activities when compared to the amount of interracial interaction that occurs when these same students have less teacher structure. It appears that the students will seek out a more racially diverse group of children to interact with when allowed to chose their own peer group.

Graph 3: Percentage of White Students Interacting Interracially



However, this is a broad statement that might not hold any weight with further inquiry and analysis. In order to complete a more concise and detailed examination of the interracial interactions at the Montessori Magnet School, several factors need to be taken into consideration. First, the observed children need to be further broken down by categories to include gender and age-group composition. Since the ages within the classroom that I observed in varied from children of ages six, seven, eight, and nine this

could contribute the manner in which children were interacting. Neither of these were variables that I was investigating, nor did I have access to the break down of age. However, these factors may have contributed to the perceived racial interactions within the school. Children may have been more apt to gravitate towards children within a similar age group or gender, but this was not accounted for in my observations. This could account for the differences in high compared to low teacher-structure. Perhaps the teacher was attempting to associate children with one another who were at similar academic and learning levels when levels of teacher structure were high. The children, when allowed to chose their playmates and peers to interact with, could simply be gravitating back towards their original friends and away from those they are linked to in an academic setting. However, this is only speculation and would need further observation to prove.

In addition, there are many other factors and variables that could also contribute to the perceived interracial interactions that are not accounted for in my observations. In comparison, the Montessori Magnet School could be compared to Mary Metz's work at three magnet middle schools in *Different By Design*. This would be difficult to do because of the age discrepancy between the middle school children and the Montessori Magnet School children. The time frames would also pose difficulty, as Metz's work included schools that were enacted as a tool for desegregation. Despite this, there are many tools that Metz included that would be useful in improving the overall effectiveness of my own observations. To begin with, Metz compares the data that she has with data for the school district as a whole that she is observing in (Metz, 161). It would be interesting to compare overall racial interactions as well as compare the average

interracial interactions in a typical Hartford public school with a similar racial makeup. It would also be useful, as Metz utilized, to include student interviews within the data set (Metz, 121). By doing this, it would be possible to analyze who was interacting with whom and who students considered to be their friends when compared to those who they interacted with on a purely academic level. Finding out if students interacted interracially socially as well as academically and comparing these numbers would also be of use in completing a successful study. Other factors that would be important to take into consideration would be the economic and social status of the students in the classroom as well as race to see if this was a contributing factor in the interactions of the students (Metz, 62). While this was not something that would have been possible to obtain in my observations, it nonetheless could play an important role in analyzing why student choose to group themselves together in particular circumstances. This corresponds to the statement that, “schools are successful only insofar as they reduce the dependence of a child’s opportunities upon his social origins” (Coleman, 122). Again, while it is not possible to analyze this for the purposes of the data that I observed, it would lead to a more complete and accurate project as a whole. There could be complete social class dependence on any of several levels, and perhaps the teacher-structure is combating this. However, the opposite could also be true of the interactions among the students. Because of this, and its relative importance to the data gathered, it would be interesting to further analyze the social component of the students at the Montessori Magnet School in regards to their rate of interaction with one another and if this number varies with teacher-structure as well.

While there are many ways to improve the study, there is still the data that was observed that suggests that the students interact interracially at an increased level when there is less teacher imposed structure in an activity. It has been suggested that despite the magnet school's increased objectives, there is little to no accountability for these goals. This is reinforced by literature claiming "magnet schools are not required to demonstrate that student achievement has improved" (Nathan, 36). When there is no mandatory consequence for the actions of the school or for achievement of goals that are set up by magnet schools, it is difficult to gauge whether or not goals are being addressed or simply becoming overlooked. With a more detailed study, it would be possible to address and analyze this statement to include whether there are standards that are met in order to ensure that the school is accountable for the objectives that it holds itself to as well as if the school is held to a standard in relation to the academic success that is encountered at the Montessori Magnet School.

Despite the needed improvement within the amount of data that is presented in the observations made at the Montessori Magnet School, it is important to not disregard the data that was collected. Student interracial interactions did increase with less teacher structure within an activity. While it is recognized that there are many other variables that could be contributing to this, there is still the awareness that there is a difference in the interactions for the students. While it is not necessarily something that can be actively combated, it is something to be aware of within the school due to the nature of the Montessori Magnet School in Hartford, CT as a place where racial and social relationships are alleged to flourish.

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