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Minority Students in the Montessori Classroom

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Introduction and Significance:

Across the United States an achievement gap continues to exist between minority students and their white counterparts. Taking the motivation of students into account is essential seeing that a student's willingness to learn also influences academic achievement. This gap is especially apparent when considering school districts, where urban schools usually contain high concentrations of minority students coming from low income families. The quality of educational resources in these schools is usually lacking and academic services outside of the classroom are scarce. Students attending suburban schools are likely to come from stable family backgrounds and have access to materials that support academic achievement. While there are other factors that contribute to student performance, considering the motivation of students is often overlooked (National Research Council, 2003). Research has demonstrated that there are no demographic differences in the fact that academic motivation begins to decrease in middle school and continues to decline upon entering high school. However, there are disparities regarding the consequences of this lack of motivation when considering minority students and their non-minority counterparts. White students who become academically uninterested are likely to live in an environment that where they are provided the opportunity to recover from academic failure. It is difficult for minority students lacking in academic motivation to recover from academic mistakes since they are not always afforded the resources that would provide second chances (Gewetz, 2006).

Research Question:

Given that motivation influences academic success, this research examines the Montessori Method, an alternative to traditional education that is noted for stimulating the child's natural ability to learn. Considering the fact that low motivation may have adverse effects on minority students in urban schools, I have investigated the following research questions; What aspects of the Montessori Method contribute to the motivation of minority students? How is this motivation perceived by teachers and parents? This was not a comparative study, but an in-depth study of experiences of minority students in the Montessori classroom.

Background- Montessori Method:

Among these alternative forms of education is the Montessori Method by Maria Montessori in Italy during the 1900's. The Montessori Method is particularly noteworthy because of the spread of the Montessori Method throughout the world, and specifically adaption in American educational system. Unlike traditional schools, the Montessori philosophy holds that children should not receive extrinsic forms of reward or punishment which include, letter grades or praise from the teacher, (Lillard, 2005). Instead, the Montessori method focuses on intrinsic motivation, where children should be driven by a natural interest in their work. Maria Montessori's past experiences with observations and studies on child development, she was led to believe that environment was a critical factor in child development. She suggested that children experienced pronounced development at different stages. Because the child's mind changes at each level of development, Maria Montessori believed the educational system should accommodate the needs of the child's natural desire to learn at each stage (Lillard, 2005). In the Montessori classroom, this is accomplished in a child-centered classroom where the teacher's role is to act as a guide while children work independently on activities

practical life skills, cooking, cleaning, and subject skills, in math, reading, and writing. Teachers guide students with a list of activities that need to be done, while the child chooses what he wants to do through exploration. Montessori classrooms typically consist of mixed age groups where students are able to learn by interacting with peers (Lillard, 2005).

Thesis:

Based on my observations of minority students at the a Montessori Magnet School it appears that a major aspect of the Montessori Method that influences motivation among minority students in this study seems to be the related to the routine of completing independent work. This practice appears to be related to students' knowledge of expectations of the teachers. It appears that the way most teachers interpret motivation is related to what students are exposed to outside of the classroom, or perceptions of these exposures. For parents, this motivation is identified by their child's interests in academic tasks without an incentive.

Literature Review:

Contemporary studies on Montessori classrooms, include a study by Rathunde and Cskszentmihaly (2005) that compared the quality of school experiences and motivations of middle school students in Montessori and traditional classrooms. The results of the study revealed that traditional students reported that academic work was important, while their responses were accompanied by low intrinsic motivation. As it pertains to my research, Montessori students reported having a greater intrinsic motivation for completing school work, and were most motivated when provided choices regarding educational tasks.

Another study investigated minority student performance under the Montessori Method (Dawson, 1987). In particular, this study focused on an urban magnet school in Texas. In this study, minority students in the Montessori Magnet school program, students performed higher than district norms on standardized tests. While this study focuses on Minority students at an urban Montessori school, it is limited in addressing the motivation of these students.

Studying the motivation of minority children in Montessori schools also required the use of other secondary resources including, John Chattin-McNichols' *The Montessori Controversy*. His book examines the strengths and weaknesses of Montessori Method as well as misconceptions about this educational approach to learning. The book also speaks to the fact that public Montessori schools are able to attract inner-city parents who may not be able to afford private Montessori Schools.

This investigating also looked at *The Science Behind the Genius* by Angeline Lillard where she addresses scientific support to verify her claims concerning the effectiveness of the Montessori Method. She describes the implementation of the Montessori Method and why it works and why aspects of traditional education have been unsuccessful in promoting student learning.

Significance to Educational Studies:

Examining the Montessori Method in this context is particularly notable seeing that present day education reform is focused on issues that include societal ills, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Educational reformers and school officials have realized these factors also contribute to academic achievement. The Montessori

philosophy encourages children to work cooperatively and focus on subject matters that interest them. There is evidence that supports the value of the Montessori Method in dealing with modern challenges on academic achievement. It is hoped that this study will provide insights to identifying features of the Montessori method that may be beneficial to minority students seeing that they are at the lower end of the achievement gap.

Methodology:

Qualitative methods were employed to perform this investigation. I have invested eight hours a week for 11 weeks at an academic internship at the Montessori Magnet School, one of four magnet schools located on the learning corridor campus in Hartford, CT. The population of the Montessori Magnet is predominantly minority students. Black students comprise 49% of the student population. Hispanic students make up 28% of the school, while 20% of the students are white. This qualitative study relied heavily on observations and interviews from teachers and parents.

The majority of my observations were of an upper elementary classroom, with children aged 9 to 12. The classroom consisted of 24 students, while 19 of them were minority students. On occasion, I observed a primary classroom with children aged 3 to 6 and a lower elementary classroom with children ages 6 to 9. Observations from these classrooms have provided insight into the application of the classroom materials. It has also demonstrated how the multi-aged classroom influences different skill levels of students. While I observed all students in the classroom, these findings are limited to the experiences of minority students.

Examining the effectiveness of the Montessori Method in motivating minority students in this study drew upon extensive field notes taken during my visits to the upper elementary classroom, and notes from my visits to the primary and lower elementary classrooms. Because this research focuses on motivation, the operational meaning of “motivation” for this study is defined as, showing an interest or willingness to complete school work. I documented motivational behaviors, which included, focusing on tasks for long periods of time, initiating activities, and appearing to be undistracted. These observations were used to engage in informal conversations about a description of the task and how they’re feelings on the task.

This research also drew upon 6 parent and 6 teacher interviews to determine perspectives of individuals who are with the students and witness the effects of the Montessori Method first hand and how the method is viewed once the children leave the classroom. It is important to recognize that these perspectives may be biased since interview candidates are employed by the Montessori School or have elected to place their children in the Montessori program. This is not a comparative study to determine that one method of education is more motivating than another. Consequently, I cannot authoritatively conclude that Montessori Method is a better motivator than other classrooms or that performance of certain students increases under this method.

Interpretation and Analysis:

An aspect of the Montessori classroom that seemed consistent in motivating minority students seemed to be related to the routine of completing independent work. My daily observations reflected students scattered to different parts of the classroom. Students were usually working independently although it was not rare to see them working in small groups of two. However, even these students were focused on the

activities in front of them. The tasks that these students worked on included PowerPoint projects, math games, piano practice on the keyboard, vocabulary review games, and labeling the life-sized skeleton, in addition to completing writing activities and math problems. The classroom was usually relatively quiet, except for a slight hum if students worked in small groups. The “norm” in the classroom seemed to be self-directed work, in which everyone in the classroom felt motivated to do. While the students rarely had to be reminded to concentrate on their own work, student responses revealed that awareness of the teacher’s expectations to focus on their own work contributed to the reasons students were able to work independently. This is evident with a student in a lower elementary classroom, where a girl was working on a pronunciation task. Because she exhibited the behavioral signs of motivation, which included, her being engaged in the activity for about a half and hour and did not seem to be distracted by the students walking around her to look for new tasks. In an informal conversation with the girl, she responded, “I am sounding the words like I always do. Ms. Adams doesn’t have to tell me because she would say I should be able to do it myself.”¹ This student has indicated that she is used to completing the activity by herself, and seems to emphasize the fact that she does not need assistance. In addition, based on her response, it is evident that she is also motivated to work alone because she knows that the teacher would encourage her to do so.

Another boy, this time in an upper elementary classroom worked on a math puzzle undistracted in a far corner of the classroom. In a conversation with this student he responded, “I don’t even like math. I wanted Chris to help me but Mr. Jones always reminds us to work on everything along first.”² This student who is focused on completing the puzzle from an observational standpoint, expressed that he wanted to work with a partner, but also shares that this would not okay with the teacher.

From an observational perspective it is clear that these students are invested in the tasks they are doing independently. Based on the operational definition of motivation for this study, these students have also exhibited the behavioral signs that indicate student motivation. However, it is important to note that their reasons for completing the tasks, or their motivations for completing the tasks is also because the teacher has established that working independently is a requirement in the classroom. While there were other aspects of the classroom that seemed pleasing to individual students, conforming to the habit of working independently was a major aspect of the Montessori Method that appeared to motivate minority students.

Teacher’s interpretations were related to student experiences or perceptions of these exposures. Most of the teachers in this study were unable to make definitive claims regarding whether ethnicity contributes to student motivation. Instead they commented on assumptions of these experiences that may effect student involvement in school. Ms. Boratte, a black Montessori teacher also noted that her white students perform better than her black students. “White parents take their children everywhere, while black and Hispanics parents cannot necessarily afford to do that. I notice that my white students tend to have a higher vocabulary, while my black and Hispanic students are limited.”³ This statement implies that white students are better prepared for the Montessori

¹ Field notes, Montessori Classroom- Lower Elementary, November 9, 2006

² Field notes, Montessori Classroom- Upper Elementary, December 11, 2006

³ Sandra Boratte, interview with Aleesha Young, November 9, 2006

classroom. While there may be some truth to this statement she is making an assumption about socioeconomic status and further presumes that poorer parents are not helping their children outside of the classroom. Perhaps her opinion is based on personal biases regarding where her students come from. It is possible that her views affect the ways she guides students in her class. This teacher may be implying that experiences of white students outside of the classroom contribute to their motivation.

Mr. Williams, a white Montessori teacher responded, "I don't know if I can say anything about race. I am sure there is some correlation. We tell parents to read to their children at home, but regardless, the children who turn in their forms are those who are already doing great."⁴ This teacher acknowledges that something may be lacking in terms of race, but is unable to identify any disparities. He further comments that teachers tell parents to read to their children and those who need to improve in reading skills are not completing this task. By making this statement he is further making the assumption that all parents have the ability to read to their children and they are just not spending the time to do it. Perhaps there is a literacy barrier, where parents are unable to read to their children. It is also important to consider that it may not be that parents do not want to read to their children or feel that reading to their children is important. It is possible that there are lacks of books in the house or those parents' spend most of their time at work to support their family.

Another black Montessori teacher seems to capture the essence of my thesis when he commented, "If the child does well but at home they are not encouraged to do so it will affect their productivity. If the child is doing well, but the teacher is not committed it affects the child. In another case, if the mom has a PhD and the dad also has a PhD it doesn't matter if the child is not willing to do the work. There is a lot that plays into it. Some children are smart and need support, they need that push, and they need that motivation."⁵ This teacher also emphasized the fact that educating the students is a triangular responsibility of teacher's who interact with the student at school, the parents/guardians who are always with the child, and the child (himself/herself). Through this statement she acknowledges that when interpreting student motivation, they fail to consider other factors that may effect student motivation. Mr. Brown states that motivation comes from within the child and lacking exposure of material outside of the classroom may contribute to this motivation if they are not aware of what they need to pursue.

The Montessori Method is embraced by many parents who like idea of its unique learning environment in a non-traditional classroom setting. "Me and my wife liked the idea of a non-traditional setting where she could advance at her own pace,"⁶ said one parent. Creating a natural environment that stimulates the child's natural curiosity to learn is engrained in the Montessori philosophy. Because parents are not with their children throughout the day, how do they recognize their children's willingness to learn? Parents were asked if their children were motivated by the Montessori Method and how they could make this determination. The pattern of responses reveals that parents interpret motivation in terms of their children's interest in an educational task without having reason or encouragement to do so. When asked if her child was motivated by the

⁴ Mark Williams, interview with Aleesha Young, November 20, 2006

⁵ Franklin Brown, interview with Aleesha Young, November 29, 2006

⁶ Melvin Wakefield, interview with Aleesha Young, December 2, 2006

Montessori classroom and how she could tell, one parent responded, “Definitely...I know they like freedom of movement, and the materials, they talk about the material they work with like they are games.”⁷ Her son’s association with the activities of the classroom with games suggests that he is entertained by the academic tasks in the classroom. It appears that his mother views this as a positive association seeing that it is one of the reasons that her son is driven by this aspect of school. His association between the material and games implied that he is learning, possibly unaware that he is also developing skills.

Another parent reflected on her daughters desire to continue learning even at home, “Yes, she loves it. Anything that she does not know she is determined to study, especially her numbers. She wants to learn at home.”⁸ Her child’s strong will to practice her numbers outside of school to this mother seems to represent true motivation seeing that she expressed an uncoaxed interest to learn. One other parent shares his daughter’s experience, “We don’t see a result from curiosity. At home she does not show a heightened interest, or if she is interested, she does not necessarily try to dig deeper.”⁹ This parent is stating that there is nothing about the Montessori Method that is self-motivating for his daughter. There is nothing about her experience that makes her want to learn more at home.

Limitations and Shortcomings:

An important detail to consider is the fact that my research focused on a public Montessori school. This is a noteworthy aspect of this investigation seeing that private Montessori programs are able to focus on the Montessori philosophy and implementing the materials in their entirety. This is a particularly difficult task for public Montessori schools seeing that these students must conform to the regulations of public schools, which include taking standardized tests. In attempts to prepare students for these tests teachers often guide students to activities and tasks where they exhibit certain weaknesses. Informal conversations with teachers were very telling in describing, a student who might want to work with sandpaper letters, might be guided by the teacher to work on geometry to enhance improvement in math.

Other limitations included my observations of one Montessori classroom. While observing one classroom allowed me to develop a close relationship with participants, visiting more classrooms would have provided richer details regarding student motivation or lack thereof. It is possible that because of the age differences, there are certain ways in which an upper elementary teacher (9-12) might guide students in his/her classroom, which might differ from the way a lower elementary teacher (6-9) directs children in his/her classroom. Furthermore, perhaps the same aspects of the Montessori classroom that motivate upper elementary students are not the same characteristics that drive lower elementary students.

It is also essential to consider the fact that focusing only on the upper elementary classroom may have provided a narrow lens for capturing all facets of the Montessori Method. This is due to the fact that upper elementary students are the oldest age group in the school. For many, students, this is their last year at a Montessori school. As a result, in addition to practicing Montessori, the curriculum must prepare these students to enter

⁷ Lydia, Sylvester, interview with Aleesha Young, November 15, 2006

⁸ Gabriella Guzman, interview with Aleesha Young, November 30, 2006

⁹ Melvin Wakefield interview with Aleesha Young, December 2, 2006

traditional school systems where the students may not experience as much freedom in the classroom. In preparation for their experiences in later education, upper elementary students usually complete more written work than their peers in lower elementary and primary elementary levels.

Conclusions:

Based on my observations, it appeared that student motivations for completing tasks were influenced by expectations of the teacher or students perceptions of these expectations. There was not enough evidence for me to perceive intrinsic motivation for most tasks. Although this observation was not included in my research question, it is important reflection seeing that the Montessori Method is noted for stimulating intrinsic motivation.

While this may not be considered a limitation, parent interviews revealed that the Montessori parents in this study were not well-versed on the Montessori Method prior to sending their children to the Montessori Magnet School. Instead the majority of these parents commented that their reasons for sending their children to the school were based on dissatisfaction with their neighborhood schools. The parents' lack of knowledge demonstrates their assumption that a "different" school means a "better" school when this may or may not be the case.

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