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The Cultural Dilemma of the American Education System: An Observation of How it Lives in Montessori

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"The Cultural Dilemma of the American Education System: An Observation of How it Lives in

Montessori"

by

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"Kindness is more important than math and we love math" (Interview, 2022)

Introduction

American educators have long understood that society "is facing a deeply rooted crisis in education" and there "is an increasing cultural and ethnic gap that exists between the nation's teachers and students" (Ramputty, 2015 & Banks et al, 2001 & Gallimore, 1996). There has been extensive literature on how schools make a significant difference in the lives of their students since the 1970's. People are aware that there is a problem. There have been numerous attempts to close this gap of inequality and lack of cultural competency in the education system via policy changes (Gallimore, 1996). As of 2017, The Center for Global Education recommended practices to decrease the negative impact of inequity in public education including making funding strategies responsive to students' and schools' needs, eliminating grade repetition, designing upper secondary education pathways to ensure completion, etc. (OECD, 2012). The problem is that "in spite of these findings [referring to the minimal change in education to be equitable], certain features of classroom practices persist decade after decade" (Gallimore, 1996: 230). Reform and policy change alone doesn't guarantee equity (OECD, 2012). This is an indication that these problems are not psychological or pedagogical in nature but rather "cultural matters" (Gallimore, 1996: 230). Gallimore refers to cultural matters as the opposite of what "policy mechanics" (people who work within policy) do which is to "empirically isolate…instructional inputs and uniform teaching practices (Gallimore, 1996: 231). What he is suggesting is that each school has its own 'culture'–broadly defined as everyday practices and social relations that shape the institution–which is not universal across pedagogy or type of institution (Gallimore, 1996: 231).

This thesis does two things. First, it describes the specific culture of a Montessori school by highlighting major themes from a selection of interviews I conducted in the months of January and February of 2022. The intention is not to measure the amount of diversity in this school, but rather to provide an observation of people's understanding of the concept. It intends to show the limits and contradictions of any schooling project which more broadly point to the structural constraints of the American education system. Moreover, it speaks to how any approach to schooling in the US with the aim of educational reform, must be situated within the specific context of a school's culture and not applied across the board to schools which share a pedagogy or curriculum.

The second thing this thesis does is acknowledge that if there were to be a pedagogy that is attuned to cultural competence, then Montessori would be a good candidate and shows the challenges and contradiction of such a 'progressive' approach. Montessori education inherently connects the formal transference of academic knowledge with what it means to be a "good human being" (Interview, 2022) which refers to a culturally competent, respectful, and curious person. Montessori places the school's culture at the center of the education while abiding by the specific pedagogy and curriculum which addresses the problems of overlooking these "cultural matters" (Gallimore, 1996).

I also argue that for the purposes of this research, the term 'culture' is the best term to use to describe the phenomena of a community's specific social makeup but acknowledge that its meaning is context-dependent and varies according to how it is used. It is important to acknowledge that this term is highly contested across the literature, largely undefinable, and practically dethroned, (Greshon et al., 2008) but it lives on in our world by means of classification and subjectivity and is interconnected to education and learning.

Conceptual Framework

Culture

I propose that culture is the best term to use in this thesis to refer to the concept of diversity and how a group (in this case a Montessori schools' community) as a social unit function, as well as the beliefs, values, and actions which inform how the community thinks and exists. The term is difficult to define as there is no universal or fixed definition in literature and historically, the concept has been often used to cause harm. For example, "institutions deploy culture as a tool of classification of 'other'" 'and see "populations as potential threats, and as potential allies in situations in which cultural differences are inevitably regarded as obstacles to be addressed" (Greshon, 2008: 420). This bureaucratic work of classification according to culture was used by the US military during the Vietnam war. Marines were taught that miscommunication can be avoided by learning some basic tactics for "dealing with the homogenous and predictable culture that determines the behavior of those they encounter" (Greshon, 2008: 419). It is not a term that can be omitted as it is ever present, evolving, and dictating the very way in which members of this community function, think, and live. Therefore, I, as the researcher, define this term through the lens of culture as used by Maria Montessori and examine the perceptions of the concept in the interviews.

The following, is one way in which Maria Montessori deployed the term and according to Ramputty, "culture plays an important role in the way a child learns. [Montessori] emphasized how children relate to the cultural acceptance of themselves and others. Like all teaching, the practice of Montessori education is best understood as cultural activity and the beliefs, values and norms of the Montessori worldview are encoded in a distinctive set of cultural scripts that

are known collectively as the Montessori method." (Ramputty, 2015: 20). This understanding is further emphasized by Cossentino highlighting the all-encompassing nature of this method; she argues that the Montessori method that is commonly described cannot really be reduced to curriculum or didactic material. "Rather, the practice of Montessori education entails participation in a highly coherent and deeply textured culture. Within that culture–what is understood to be the values, beliefs, and norms shared by Montessorians–members construct the meaning not only of a particular type of teaching and learning but a particular type of living" (Cossentino, 2005: 212). This understanding of culture in this context supports the fact that in a Montessori school, the children and guides are viewed as equal actors in creating the culture of the classroom and the school's community. Ramputty argues that "the culture constructs the personality of the child, incarnates itself within the child and lives" (Ramputty, 2015:4). "It's in every individual who exists in the physical and metaphorical space which is the school and larger community that share a "set of (implicit and explicit) values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behavior that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself" (Hudelson, 2004: 345). Everyone as a collective is creating "a dynamic and evolving socially constructed reality that exists in the mind of social group members" (Hudelson, 2004: 345).

Over the span of five interviews I conducted, the school staff described, identified, or used the term 'culture' in a multitude of ways. Some of the common themes used to describe culture in terms of classification (rather than overarching concept) included political standing, skin color, socioeconomic status, family structure, gender identity, languages spoken, religious affiliation or spirituality, nationality, dress, food, age, and ableism. Other references include ethnicity, demographic, customs, values, human needs, and more. The descriptions of culture in the interviews are more specific and can be thought of as defining words of classification rather

than Montessori's definition in use which was addressing the larger concept as it functions in her theory. These two approaches to the definition are useful in that through Maria Montessori's lens, one can examine and think about the concept of culture in the way it shapes the theory and practices of schooling and can rely more heavily on the definitions from the interviews when needing to see how it functions and manifests in everyday life.

History of Montessori

The history of Montessori lends itself simultaneously to demonstrating how it is built upon a global and culturally adept set of values while exemplifying the shortcomings it now poses to serve a wide demographic of people due to its migration from Italy to the United States. Maria Montessori was an Italian scientist, educator, and physician who was interested in scientific pedagogy and experimental psychology. In 1907 the first *Casa dei Bambini* (Children's House) was opened in San Lorenzo Italy–a poor, inner-city district which was home to some of the most uneducated and disadvantaged children. Through her science focused background, she used observation as one of her main methods of educational development to create materials and pedagogy. By 1910 Montessori schools were found throughout Europe and by 1911 there was the first school in New York. This transition to the West changed the audience and community of Montessori. Wealthy and esteemed families pushed to get their children into this new and globally renowned education (History of Montessori Education, n.d.)

However, by the 20th century the movement west died as quickly as it had started. World War 1 travel limitations and anti-immigration settlement were a few of the reasons. Disdain from highly regarded educator William Kilpatrick (a disciple of John Dewey) critiqued the Montessori method and rejected her beliefs about current literature in education at the time (Majure,

2019). The second wave of Montessori to the US also had undertones of racial segregation and was seen by some as serving more specific populations (History of Montessori Education, n.d.). As Majure points out "by making Montessori only obtainable for children whose parents could afford private tuition, the renowned Rambusch and Vanderlip (an aspiring teacher from New York who was thought to have started the second movement entirely) aided in widening the socioeconomic and racial gap in American Education (Majure, 2019). "The subject of the first two waves [to America] was the well-developed child of the middle class while the subject of Dr. Montessori's original works were the well-developed disadvantaged children. The former perpetuates socioeconomic divides in society, and the latter seeks to close the gap" (Majure, 2019).

Fundamentally, Montessori developed her method with an intent to increase the developmental opportunities of underprivileged children to minimize poverty in Italy. By the time it reached America, the two waves of Montessori had made the education more amenable to a certain population over another. This information sheds light on ways in which Montessori schools and communities must navigate how this history has affected the perception of this education in the US and any lingering challenges left over by its history as well as modern political and social climates in their communities.

Montessori Education

Montessori captures the idea that education begins with the child and not the adult; the learning environment is centered on what children do naturally. It's both a philosophy of child development and a logic for guiding a child's growth. "Freedom within limits and a carefully prepared environment which guarantees exposure to materials and experiences" are two

important aspects of the method (Ramputty, 2015). One unique factor which sets Montessori apart is that teachers are referred to as 'guides.' The definition was addressed in the interviews; A "'guide' will guide a child and guide their process, whereas a teacher is more about content delivery and less about bringing out someone's fullest potential" (Interview, 2022). This way of thinking about the role of the adult in a classroom works to combat the implicit hierarchies in traditional education and speaks to how Montessori takes less of a top-down approach which aligns with Montessori's usage of the term culture. In her theory, students and guides alike are working as a collective to create their socially constructed reality (Hudelson, 2004). Other facets of this pedagogy include periods of uninterrupted work, the liberty for children to choose the materials they want to work with, trained Montessori guides, multi-age classrooms, and child-directed work.

In practical terms, the Montessori method is unique because of the environment, use of language, format of lessons, and materials. Montessori guides rarely act directly on the subject of study (the student) but rather act on the environment in which the content is presented. Guides can tailor aspects of the environment for individual students; for example, the guide may prepare the lesson on a floor mat instead of a table, swap out colored beads for natural stones of differing colors, etc. The environment "fosters a liminal encounter between means to an end in method" (Debs, 2019: 231). The guide prepares the environment and then invites the student to work with the materials within that environment. The "didactic material mediates learning by uniting the hand and mind" (Debs, 2019: 230).

This method is unique in that it is 'cosmological;' it provides a framework for children to understand the interconnectedness of all things in this world and their place within it (Montessori and Cosmic Education, 2022). This is relevant to modern times because Dr. Maria Montessori

"believed that the world was a purposeful place; and that war, poverty, and injustice, were deviations from that purpose. That global awareness, peaceful communication, and ethical cooperation are integral to resolving global disputes"–that cosmic education was a way to achieve harmony and order (Montessori and Cosmic Education, 2022). In traditional education, the focus is centered more prominently on the learning and academic achievement of the individual child and excludes the interconnected and community aspects. In its foundational theory, Montessori inherently responds to many of the problems which contribute to harmful societal beliefs about people of other cultures. Maria Montessori believed that if education followed the natural development of the child, then society would gradually move to a higher level of cooperation, peace, and harmony (Ramputty, 2015: 17). It is said that if a student were to transfer from one Montessori classroom to another across the globe, there would be minimal growing pains compared to other methods of education. "The continuity of learning allows the students to pass seamlessly through the various stages of development" (Majure, 2019: 42). The ease in which one Montessori student can theoretically transfer to another Montessori environment reveals the extent to which Montessori claims a certain universality of theory and practice no matter the geographical location of the institution.

Methodology

This thesis is a case study of a Montessori school conducted between 2021 and 2022. To ensure confidentiality, I will not be disclosing the name of the school nor any of the participants interviewed. Each classroom in the Montessori curriculum is made up of about three 'standard' grades or age levels; however, the students are in their respective classrooms based on their

planes of development[1] so the breakdown is not tied to age (Interview, 2022). Each classroom

has children of mixed ages and genders (Interviews, 2022).

It is important to note that the many regulations the American Education system imposes

upon its teachers and institutions would make maintaining the integrity of an AMI (Association

Montessori Internationale) Montessori school extremely challenging if it were to be public. For

example, there are certain academic testing requirements of public education which are not seen

in Montessori. More specifically, in charter Montessori programs in certain states, "their

elementary students cannot do 'going-outs' (student-led trips outside of the school)" (Interview,

2022). An interviewee emphasized how a "true Montessori approach allows for a guide's

autonomy" and this autonomy allows the guides to do their jobs in a positive and effective way

in order to address the specific needs of each of their students (Interview, 2022). The

privatization of Montessori schools allows for Montessori programs to face less difficulties in

regard to philosophy and fidelity (it has been shown than best results in Montessori programs

occur with a "high fidelity" implementation viewpoint), access to fully trained Montessori

teachers, specifically prepared environments, and limitations surrounding funding (Montessori

Public, 2019).

The school is able to claim to follow the Montessori philosophy more closely because it

resides in the private sector for these reasons: This school, among many other Montessori

schools, relies "on (a certain amount of) money to pay bills and be in existence" (Interview,

2022). Financial necessity is a possible reason for why most of the families which attend this

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[1] The Four Planes (or phases) of development in Montessori is a framework which describes Montessori's overall view of development of the human being psychologically. The planes include (1) Infancy [physical and biological independence], (2) Childhood [mental independence], (3) Adolescence [Social Independence], and Maturity [spiritual and moral independence]. Most Montessori guides specialize in education regarding a specific plane of development hence the separation of classrooms (Grazzini, 1996).

school are a part of the middle to upper socioeconomic class; however, they do have financial assistance options which are used every year for students in an attempt to address the economic restrictions required as a part of private education. In terms of racial demographic, the perception of diversity generally was described as more homogenous (racially white) however, the school has a wide variety of community members which do not identify with the majority. There are community members which identify as queer, divorced, blended, single, adoptive, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial. It was also noted in multiple interviews that some families have a home language that is not English.

It is important to note my positionality in this research as I also attended a Montessori school. This means that my positionality, as an **alumni** of a Montessori program, shapes the kind of knowledge I am producing in that I look to Montessori to be a viable pedagogy when pondering questions of cultural competency.

Data Collection & Analysis

The Institutional Review Board at Portland State University qualified this research as "exempt and satisfying the provisions for protecting the rights and welfare of all." The semi-structured interviews and literature review process was qualitative in nature. I had an in-person meeting with a staff member followed by a presentation of my research intentions to teachers. From this presentation, I received verbal permission to study at the school and conduct interviews. Over the course of two months, I conducted five semi-structured interviews and manually transcribed them taking the necessary precautions to ensure confidentiality. I created a colored coding system to identify emerging themes from the interviews as my method of data

analysis. The data analysis process occurred in conjunction with the literature review which informed much of my analysis.

Methodological Gap/Room for Further Research

I want to acknowledge what I perceive to be a methodological gap in this research: conducting a full ethnography as an undergraduate honors student was not feasible due to various constraints such as time frame, IRB approval for working with children, COVID-19 safety, etc. There was no direct or indirect participant observation. I hope that further research can be conducted more ethnographically (including participant observation) to ensure that future researchers take a more comprehensive and holistic approach when studying the role of culture in the American Education system as it pertains to Montessori programs. Furthermore, I hope that future research on institutions of power such as those of education, are able to work more closely with their community of study to produce literature that multiple parties feel is relevant in addressing problems or gaps seen pertaining to the institution.

Main Body

I conducted five semi-structured interviews over the span of two months at a Montessori school. The following key themes emerged: (1) Perceptions among staff members of diversity as reflecting the demographic of its geographical location and to an extent, confined by structural limitations. (2) Community members desire for different types of diversity. (3) A tendency for the school to attract a more homogeneous demographic based off of different ways in which information about the culture of the school is being disseminated (either by the school's community, and/or because of the structural constraints of being a private school in its

geographical context), (4) The affirmation of a 'culture of kindness' which is based on Montessori theory and exists and lives in the morals, values, and beliefs of the community members. This 'culture of kindness' describes the internal culture of the school and works to challenge the structural constraints of a private institution to address these cultural-competency dilemmas.

These four themes deal with the perceptions of community members regarding these topics rather than critique of what was shared as well as the cultural practices of schooling rather than with the pedagogy itself. Pedagogy, in contemporary usage, refers to the art or science of teaching children and is a synonym for 'means of guidance' (Shah, 2021) The cultural practices of schooling are seldom acknowledged as a part of the modern-day definition of pedagogy, thus the separation. For the most part, pedagogy no longer includes the all-encompassing cultural aspects of education but is instead used primarily to refer to a method of teaching based on a specific theory (Shah, 2021). One must look at a school as a cultural unit rather than as a product of its pedagogy–no two schools are the same despite having the same educational method. The evidence that follows this section, connects directly to this point, showing that in the broader sense of schooling, each school is its own cultural unit. I argue that this 'culture of kindness' does in fact transcend these factors such as language, political leaning, skin color, nationality etc. which are currently reinforcing the homogenous culture of this local school. This school exists within a specific context, so the fact that all the students are leaving the program with an open and respectful outlook towards humans and life–despite some students having a more privileged positionality–suggests that Montessori is extremely attuned to answering these questions of cultural competence in education.

Theme 1: Understanding the Relative Lack of Diversity

Diversity emerged as a chief concern among school staff. As one administrator explained, the school population was not all white, it included LGBTQ+ population, diverse family units, and a large neurodivergent population. Nonetheless, and as an example of their concern about and commitment to diversity, guides often remarked on what they perceived to be a lack of greater racial and socioeconomic diversity. The guides showed an awareness of the power of language in their descriptions of culture and diversity when asked about how they would define this term. They understood that by generalizing their descriptions of diversity to one or a few facets is problematic and can reinforce this perceived issue of the 'lack of greater racial and socioeconomic diversity.' The guides referred to three main concepts when conveying their concerns about the school's commitment to diversity and the ways in which larger structural systems reinforce that. These include race, political standpoint, and socioeconomic status.

When asked about how they would describe diversity in their school, race, in terms of skin color, was a common description in the interviews. The guides said that the student body is mostly white in racial makeup. However, as the guides explained, referring to skin color as the primary definition of 'whiteness' is insufficient to capture the dominant social context, class, and other entrenched power structures implied (Interviews, 2022). They expressed that 'whiteness' as a term fails to capture the all-encompassing nature of what they were really trying to say when describing the context of the student body and community of this school. There was a clear uneasiness expressed when skin color was used as the primary definition of diversity, which is indicative of how this term rears its head in modern day society and is deeply embedded in classifying mechanisms ingrained in the American Education System which Montessori values combat. One guide reflected upon the use of racial makeup as a description best: "it's a blanket

statement we use to lament the lack of a lot of different representatives and a lot of different races…we don't have a 100% white student body so to say we have no diversity is misleading" (Interview, 2022). The guide paused in their response then added that as Montessori staff "definitely wish they had more children of different skin colors and socioeconomic backgrounds." All the guides in these interviews and across the board gave me the sense that they know discussing diversity in terms of descriptions of classification such as skin color is problematic (I as the researcher asked about their perception of the term) and when they make these blanket statements, it's only solidifying this emphasis on racial classification which they identified to be problematic. It's giving power to vocabulary which reinforces limitations. The relative diversity within this school is extremely nuanced, however using racial makeup as a common definition of diversity was mostly consistent[2].

Much of the children's political views or exposure to opinions about a political party comes from their home environments. A guide explained that they were "confident about the messaging that children are getting at home from their parents [and has] a pretty good idea where the parents get their views, so by extension the children " as well. (Interview, 2022). This guide was confident in the context of the population they serve–alluding in part, to the majority of the community sharing similar political values, but mostly that they have a clear understanding of the beliefs, values, and opinions of their students. One example given was the Black Lives Matter Movement in summer 2020. A guide described how classes were held over zoom at the time of these protests. Between class sessions, guides and students alike were watching the news and following the updates. The urgency to address what was happening in the city was palpable.

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[2] The fact remains however, that this is a majority white school and this effort to think about diversity more expansively is in part, a way to avoid addressing the structural dimensions (something which is very common in this location and other majority white places/institutions).

The children brought in questions and as the guide put it, we all "pretty much come to class with the same information; me and the children." (Interview, 2022) "We don't have to have conversations about checking your sources [said the guide]. This confidence the guide had in their students to know what sources are valid versus those which are not shows the relationship the guide has with their students is so strong that they trust young students to be able to filter through news and media publications even when it is highly contested. It also shows that if "we [the school was] in a different demographic, we would definitely have more interesting conversations…we can still talk about opposing [political] sides, but maybe without someone to represent it" said a guide referencing their perception that on the political spectrum, the majority of the student population politically leans more to one side than the other (Interview, 2022)

Socioeconomic status was a consistent theme when describing the context of the school and subsequently the type of students and families attracted to it. The fact is that the school is a private institution and therefore, there are specific costs associated with keeping its doors open. The perception amongst the interviewees was that a portion of the families which attend this school come from upper socioeconomic backgrounds—a common trait of any private educational institution despite the school offering financial aid. Some staff members noted that in a few rare cases, for some children it "can be a shock in the ways that we expect them to jump in and contribute to things" when they're not used to helping out at home (Interview, 2022). Multiple guides spoke about how there is a vast spectrum, and some students even have nannies or have parents have the privilege of time to help them pack lunches and drive them to school. These children's home environments were taken care of for them, and therefore this transition into an equal-contribution mindset in a Montessori classroom sometimes caused specific students to initially struggle–especially if they were new to a Montessori community. This transition,

though difficult for few, is quickly made as children pick up on the Montessori values of respect, kindness, etc. which is fostered in the classroom. An example of how this is picked up on is by looking at how the students communicate these values. Some students have to learn to "pick up after themselves" explained a guide and "their friends don't like it when they don't help out" (Interview, 2022). The guide said that "there is this one child, who is an only child and comes from a wealthier family. He doesn't want to do his job during clean up and so he goes to the bathroom for the entire period. The two children he really likes are older and checked him and let him know that that's not part of what is done here and isn't fair" (Interview, 2022). This demonstrates that no matter the background of each individual child, the emphasis in Montessori is on the community as a collective.

There are multiple types of homogeneity which contribute to this perception of limited diversity: racial and ethnic identity, political viewpoints, and socioeconomic status of the families. These three findings highlight how in this specific school, culture as a topic of education (in terms of non-western customs, foods, dress, daily life, etc.) is being taught and understood by an individual who is not necessarily native to that culture–this is largely a result of its geographical context. Secondly, it emphasizes how the teaching of cultures that aren't represented in the school can be approached from a lens of formal education if desired rather than in a way that emerges from a necessity to navigate real-world cultural differences on a daily basis. The nuanced diversity within this community emerges in ways, which I as the researcher assume are not due to disagreements or points of disrespect, but rather through the values in Montessori which instill all actions are done with grace, courtesy, and kindness.

This perception of diversity in terms of classifying concepts can only be described and perceived accurately by the community members in this school, not from somebody in policy

reform who is trying to influence educational institutions in the geographic location or across the Montessori pedagogy for example. The concerns the guides have and stories the guides expressed, highlight how this school has its own culture due to the context in which it resides. The pedagogy lends itself to kindness and cross-cultural learning, however the context that this school is at the mercy of, poses challenges to the transference from desire to actuality regarding certain classificatory factors such as race, politics, and socioeconomic class.

Theme 2: The Desire for Diversity

The second key theme is a desire for more diversity in the school–a desire which is specific to the community members of this school (meaning that this desire isn't necessarily shared by other private Montessori programs) and largely due to the context it is situated in. The context is determined by the geographical location, type of people (inhabitants not representing a wide diversity of people in terms of racial makeup), and necessity to be in the private sector. As the researcher, I cannot claim that this is a universal desire across all Montessori programs because I have not conducted research on other schools. However, the specificity of this desire shows that (1) it is a 'cultural matter' of this school and, (2) in its values, this pedagogy encourages its community to be kind and culturally aware of all other humans. Political tensions, the DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) push coming from the American Education system prompted by recent events sheds light on how this reported desire for diversity is limited by the constraints of the American Education System, despite its attempts to offer a holistic and accessible education to all.

A few guides alluded to the fact that their student body "is made up of the same culture and that without having a diverse group of children you can really only get so far[3]" (Interview, 2022) noting this desire for a more heterogeneous (in all classifying aspects) student body. A staff member described a time when a parent was upset that his tuition dollars were being used to support a student-led march in protest of a recent school shooting. This example highlights the way in which this school places their values of openness and respect into action. A staff member said that "some students decided to go on a march around the school being the righteous go-getters they are." Photos were taken and put in the weekly newsletter which prompted this tension to arise. Despite the father not being explicit about the reason this caused tension, it seemed to be politically charged. A staff member reflected upon how when "we're talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion…and when people hear those words they think of color, they think of socioeconomic status" (this shines light on the fact that race and socioeconomic status were two the ways in which diversity was classified in the interviews). The father's reaction exemplified how different approaches to current events can have unintended undertones of politics. The school's dominant values of kindness and human respect were exemplified by the students standing up for what they felt were current events that didn't align with those values. However, the manner in which they showed this happened to affect this parent and highlights the varied ways in which these values can be interpreted. It seemed as though most often the school

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[3] This usage of language by the guide highlights an implicit way in which homogeneity towards the dominant demographic is upheld. The guide uses the term "culture" to talk about racial identity and class without explicitly saying so, thus providing an example of how language used in education is implicated in the reproduction of racial normativity (Rosa, 2015). There is power in our words, and it needs to be acknowledged that language is within the "white gaze" (Rosa, 2015: 152). There needs to be a shift in critical language awareness amongst both students and school staff across this country. The goal is for "students to become conscious of their communicative behavior and the ways by which they can transform the conditions under which they live" (Rosa, 2015: 154)

represents their values in a unified or similar way which is a trait of a culture–shared values, causes of happiness and joy, and a sense of mission/purpose are a few (Peterson, 1998).

The tension begs the question of "how do we close this gap between desire and action?" (Interview, 2022). The values which are core to Montessori education and fostered in this school, will act as the basis for, as it was put in an interview closing "this gap" (Interview, 2022).

Theme 3: Dissemination of the School's Culture into the Community

The third key theme is that the school is portraying a specific culture to the external community through parent-teacher relationships and interaction with prospective families both in various ways. There is a certain culture being portrayed outwards through their direct marketing and meetings with potential parents as well as through the voices, behaviors, and beliefs shared by the students who attend the school and alumni thereafter. These forms and methods of communication are common in educational institutions of all kinds, and it is inevitable that the values which are prioritized in a school are portrayed outwards. A family which aligns with those values will often be attracted to the school and subsequently reinforce its values. This highlights how the communication through explicit marketing strategies which show the values of the school influence prospective families, but it also speaks to how the culture of the school is being implicitly communicated to prospective families as well–a reason why understanding the specific culture of the school is important.

In a private institution, it is critical to understand the intersection between the school's culture and the culture of prospective families. The culture of the school must be clear enough to market to prospective families. However, the interviews suggested that although one narrative of this school's culture is being explicitly marketed, it does not always align with the views of

current parents. This begs the question of 'what specifically attracted these families to this school?' and urges one to take a deeper look at shared commonalities and elements of community–importance on community being a trait of Montessori education. Although the guides reported that a consistent message of the school's culture is being conveyed to the community, the degree to which they described their actions regarding engagement with parents individually varied, thereby impacting how much each individual guide contributes to this messaging.

The value of openness was exemplified in the interviews by the guides describing their open-door policy to parents. In other forms of education, parents are rarely even allowed onto the campus let alone into the classrooms to sit down or talk with the teachers so openly. Most of the guides agreed that they know the kids' parents relatively well, know what languages they speak at home, or different general bits of information about the students' home life (Interviews, 2022). One guide explained how if a child is having difficulties, you may become closer to that parent in particular because there is more frequent communication. Other times the guide's personality may just mesh well with a parent's personality.

The ways in which guides communicate and interact with parents depends on personal preference of the guide in some way but also the age of the student. For example, "at the younger level there is a lot more parent communication," explained a guide, "but when they get up to the [higher levels] it's a lot more of 'we'll be in touch if we need to be aside from the daily greetings at pick-up and drop-off'" (Interview, 2022). Some guides expressed that they are in regular communication with parents concerning home life and other aspects that may affect the child's behavior or mood. For some, this approach in communication with parents was due to the fact that they teach younger children who are not as able to communicate these types of things

themselves. As the children grow, they gain an ability to communicate many things which involved the guides in the past. A guide expressed their level of communication in terms of a "clearly stated open-door policy" and "we will be in touch if anything needs to be communicated beyond the greetings at drop-off and pick-up" (Interview, 2022). This minimal 'need' rather than want with children who are gaining the ability to communicate themselves, speaks to how the parents trust the guides and vice versa. The values of the families for the most part align with the values emphasized in the school.

During the time when COVID-19 was at a peak, school was being held via Zoom and interactions with parents shifted dramatically. Guides explained how it is different on Zoom and despite seeing parents' faces more frequently on the screen, there was a lack of parental presence. Parents and professionals were no longer observing classrooms as they usually would, and there were no school festivals (where parents are invited onto campus) either. One guide explained that they "spent more time connecting with parents while they were online because they held office hours every week where parents could sign up for. Some parents signed up every month (Interview, 2022). The guide noticed that parents really wanted to continue that consistent connection. "I could still do that here (in person)" (Interview, 2022). Other guides noted that once school was back in-person, some parents interacted even less and there was a feeling of relief as they (the parents) were not in charge of their kids' learning 24/7 and thus didn't reach out as much (Interview, 2022).

This sense of relief felt by parents, of not having to be hands-on, highlights the broader systemic issues at play which support the dominant demographic at this school and could be perceived as penalizing those who do not fit in that category as easily due to their background. The parents' relief goes hand-in-hand with a sense of trust that the teachers and the school will

provide their children with an excellent education absolving the parents of consistent

involvement. This trust shows that parents at the school accept the principle that in Montessori

education, the measure of success is qualitative rather than quantitative. That can only be

achieved if there is a clear understanding of how their child's education is progressing. The

Montessori philosophy on homework is an illuminating example: the literature suggests that

parents who lacked these types of class and economic resources or came from a homework-

heavy traditional education themselves, were unable to comfortably accept or understand the

progress their children were making due to the lack of homework (Debs, 2019). This was

especially prevalent in lower-income Latinx, white, and Black families and was only heightened

if the parents didn't speak English and thus, relied primarily on numerical grading to measure

their child's success. In this way, Montessori being so specific and different from the traditional

American public school system attracts prospective families who have the means to research an

entirely new method of education highlighting the broader systemic implications of

socioeconomic class which aids in exclusion (Debs, 2019).

     The prospective families attracted to this school often already align with dominant values

and see themselves as fitting into the social area in some way. It was explained that there is a

great deal of effort being put in by staff members to form connections with parents. A staff

member felt that by being communicative and giving time to parents, families who are a good fit

with the school's philosophy and community will foster a more cohesive and happy community.

The staff member explained that talking to families about "partnership" was commonly

discussed. An analogy was shared that "we (the school) sell fish, we do not sell crab" meaning

that families have a clear understanding about what to expect from the school's specific

community and the Montessori pedagogy. It was also stated that Montessori education "allows

the child to be who they are [rather than making] doctors and lawyers" (Interview, 2022). This interview sheds light on ways in which the school's dominant culture is tacitly upheld. It's not that members of this school are being explicitly exclusionary, rather, families who see themselves as being a good fit, are most often in alignment with the dominant culture of the school.

There have been examples of families who don't fit in with the dominant culture yet persevere for the sake of the child's education which highlights how the values of kindness, graciousness, etc. are core to humans across the board. A staff member told a story about how a father explained that he wasn't really friends with any of the other parents or anybody in the community. This family selected this school because the father had attended Montessori his whole life and valued it as a pedagogy. The father said, "these are not our people" (Interview, 2022). "I know what my son is going to get here," he said, "it is going to serve him as it served me as a human being" (Interview, 2022). This parent recognized it was important for his son's education and development as a human being to be a part of this school, but that his family's values and lifestyle did not align with the dominant culture of the school's community which in this case didn't cause points of tension, but rather just show how sharing values (maintaining a culture of kindness) has the ability to transcend differences.

The notion of a 'good fit' further highlights how there are structures, barriers, and social interactions which tailor that match. "Issues of race and class have a great deal to do with how different parents experienced the school, notably their sense of "fit" (Debs, 2019: 84). As Mira Debs argues, often it is "families with the greatest resources who are most likely to capitalize on this concept of a 'good fit.'" Because they have the time to research the most schools and

educational philosophies, and money is not a limitation, they can explore a variety of private schools until they find the match they are looking for (Debs, 2019: 149).

Although the degree of intentionality regarding exclusion by this school cannot be established, placing experiences and opinions from the schools' staff in the broader systemic context demonstrates how the school's specific culture may be inadvertently acting exclusionary towards those who don't align with the dominant demographic. This does not mean it's the staff's agenda or intention, but rather that these larger systems at play limit the degree to which this local school can actually create the heterogeneous culture they wish to see.

Theme 4: The 'Culture of Kindness'

The last key theme is what I call a 'culture of kindness' which is an integral part of Montessori theory and exists and lives in the morals, values, and beliefs of the community members. This theme is most apparent in the schools' specific culture and in the pedagogy. A culture of kindness is embedded throughout the curriculum, the manner in which knowledge is delivered, and the training guides receive on ways to interact with students. There may not be much 'diversity' present, but there is a clear inner school culture in which I argue can theoretically, can transcend language, religion, nationality, skin color, etc. This culture of kindness is present in the literature and described as the "ethic of care" (Ramputty, 2015:27). Kindness is shown both through formal means (lessons, curriculum, teacher training, etc.) and informal means (beliefs, values, morals, behaviors encouraged or discouraged, etc.) which can be best understood as 'cultural activity' (Gallimore, 1996). However, this culture of kindness is still specific to each Montessori school and dependent upon the community members who create and reinforce it.

The formal teaching of culture in the Montessori curriculum and classroom starts from an early age. "We in Montessori go all the way back to the formation of the earth at the beginning of the school year," said a guide referring to the five Great Lessons. These include (1) the Coming of the Universe and the Earth; (2) the Coming of life; (3) the Coming of Humans; (4) the Story of the Alphabet; and (5) the Story of Numbers. They demonstrate that everything has a purpose and a contribution in the development of the universe (Ramputty, 2015). "It is meant to be humbling to the human to see what came before them and what comes through in so many lessons. We show how, over time, humans met their fundamental needs which are the same as our needs today. Our needs, your needs, are the same needs as humans 2,000 years ago" (Interview, 2022). There is an attitude of humility and awe about what it means to be human and for all existence. These five Great lessons are repeated every year which allows the child to get more out of each lesson every time it is given. This fact was both discussed without prompting in the interviews and highlighted in literature on Montessori pedagogy. These lessons are really the foundations and formal lessons about humankind and the formation of what it means to be human and by extension, the formation of culture.

This foundational understanding of humankind is also supported in the classroom and by the curriculum in other smaller but tangible ways. For example, birthdays, holidays, books, food, discussions, arts and crafts, songs, music, and decoration are all ways in which culture is formally taught. "When it's a child's birthday, they get to bring in photos of themselves showing every year of their life, and often conversations about their home life stem from that," described a guide (Interview, 2022).

Using seasonality to expand the set of holidays discussed and introduced in the classroom was a widely used tactic. Some guides felt there has been a recent deemphasis of holidays in

general. One guide noted that "the changes in the classroom are seasonal by nature and therefore more global" (Interview, 2022). During the wintertime "I will decorate the classroom with blue and white colors, incorporate books that occur during our winter months and change the color of the sorting beads to blues and whites as well" (Interview, 2022). Different books about holidays were universally used, and one guide said, "everybody likes to party" (Interview, 2022). This guide used books as a common form of introduction followed by conversations prompted by questions such as "where do fireworks come from, [and] how is X food made?" (Interview, 2022). Making dreidels, Chinese lanterns, grinding spices, and cooking new foods were all ways in which guides formally incorporated global culture into their lessons[4]

None of this formal incorporation of knowledge would be received or even exist in the classroom without the values of Montessori education as taught to the guides during their training and learned through experience. The ways in which the guides actively and intentionally use their positionality makes a difference. The guides are very aware that they "are by no means experts [of a specific culture or concept] and don't present [themselves] as such" they provide introductions to concepts–most of which they don't practice or have extensive knowledge of themselves (Interview, 2022). The guides act as the main gatekeepers of information and do this by guiding and tailoring conversations in alignment with the values of the classroom. A guide gave a clear example on how "if people are talking about [religion] we orbit gently around the children to help steer them" (Interview, 2022). This guidance is not towards any specific spiritual beliefs or values of their own, but towards a broader culture of openness and kindness. For

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[4] These examples also speak to the recognition of differences between cultures in various manifestations and to the idea of humanism. Dr. Montessori's theory was based on the biological planes of development of the child, which for the most part, can be assumed to be universal across the globe. Perhaps Montessori seeks to find the balance between ideas about and claims to the development of universalism as well as recognize the differences between specific cultures.

younger children this guidance might require a more direct approach: "If a child says Santa is or isn't real, instead of saying yes or no, [the guide asks instead] 'oh are you getting ready for the holidays?'" (Interview, 2022). Another guide explained that "when those hot button issues happen, I sit and observe and direct it back to our students" (Interview, 2022). Direct involvement is less necessary for children further along in the planes of development as the children's age can comprehend 'more sensitive information.'

As the children reach new developmental planes, they gain the capacity for a more complex understanding of human relationships, opinions, and behaviors–specifically those which differ from their immediate experience. They are capable of understanding and discussing social justice issues with a great level of emotional empathy and intellectual curiosity by the time they reach upper planes of development. One guide explained a time where they recognized their own ability to confidently have a conversation about any topic due to the formal training the guides receive about acting and speaking with kindness. The guide said,

> "Just as Trump was voted into the presidency, there were many conversations in the classroom about the matter. I acted solely as the facilitator, and I did not bring anything up. There was a time when some kids heard other kids speaking ill of Trump and went up to them, basically saying 'hey I don't think that's very kind to speak like that. Our parents voted for Trump.' This took me a minute to process. I was very surprised. I listened to this conversation right before our class gathering time and during the gathering, I brought up that some parents voted one way while others another. A child asked me who I had voted for, and I answered, 'I did not vote for Trump'" (Interview, 2022).

This was an example of one singular guide's approach, story, and opinion. This conversation ended without any further explicit tension about the election in the classroom. It clearly

exemplifies the values of honesty, kindness, and most of all, how direction and learning is led by the students and only guided by the teachers. The guide often noted how the children will ask to speak about something as a class, at which point, the guide will facilitate the conversation.

Most transmission of culture occurs informally and not as part of the formal curriculum. Guides act as role models, and the children teach each other every day. The guides say it is their biggest job to prepare these children for the world they are currently living in–this extends far beyond the individual lessons the guides provide as part of the formal curriculum. Much of this classroom culture that was spoken of is a direct result of the social interactions and embodied practices of the community. The common thread between the interviews was an emphasis on how it's absolutely necessary to pitch-in and be an active member of the community. An awareness of others in the space allows for the development of empathy.

Guides model this empathetic behavior. If a child brought a lunch which sparked the interest of the other children, multiple guides expressed they would approach it the same way– with excitement and an air of celebration: "Did you get that food at a new restaurant? Did your grownup make that for you? The children look to the guides to gauge their own reactions. A child came to school one day dressed in a kimono and all the children were like 'I want to wear that; may I touch that please?' A boy came wearing a dress one day and they 'filled in the category that boys can wear dresses too.'" (Interview, 2022). Children exhibiting this kind of curiosity and behavior don't tend to be very judgmental; they are coming into consciousness. Even though "we are teaching them to be independent, they don't know their identity and are learning that other people think differently than they are" (Interview, 2022). What's unique to this pedagogy is that the guides specifically tailor their responses when confronted with situations that challenge society's norms, thus creating an environment and culture of kindness

that is so natural, that it hopefully becomes ingrained in the children long after they leave the classroom.

Guides who are in classrooms with children of a different plane of development, spoke to the developmental stage of their students as well and understood that these children are more aware of what other people think of them which can be a good thing. "A huge part of what we do is help them to understand how to think outside of themselves," explained a guide, "our collaboration is a really positive part of the classroom. It's not the goal for the individual to get ahead and to compete, but it's that instinct to be social that's the biggest tool… The sense of complete community awareness" (Interview, 2022).

Conclusion

Economic and social structures in modern-day society make it difficult for people from the non-white marginalized populations to access private schools with a specific pedagogy and these difficulties revealed themselves in this research. One way in which structural limitations directly affect the cultural context of this school is by limiting the diversity of prospective families and community members. The location in which the school currently resides is not racially or ethnically diverse and "the student body reflects [its] immediate neighborhoods" (Interview, 2022). Additionally, the perpetuation of this homogeneity can go undetected as prospective families are usually already aligned with the dominant group when they become a part of the community thereby upholding and perpetuating the dominant culture further. Minority families (in terms of socio-economic status, race, etc.) can cause tensions as opposing opinions are tricky to navigate and often cause discomfort.

A key tension is between the stated desire for more 'diversity' versus the reality of building a heterogeneous community. The complexities of conveying messages about delicate topics such as politics or race are compounded by the everyday difficulties educators face in their jobs. However, it is important to acknowledge that the ability to choose how the concept of culture is incorporated into lessons is a privilege in and of itself–one that is a product of the school's demographic and not the educators' skills.

In fact, the educators at this school make a great effort; one guide said: "We're constantly trying to make sure that we have a diverse range of things that we can talk about. We try to embrace the cultures of the students but, realizing that where we live, most of what we're embracing is the same culture." (Interview, 2022). The guides do work within the current culture and demographic at the school. One unique way in which its community differs from the dominant culture is by supporting family's which identify as queer or have various family structures which don't necessarily resemble the typical American nuclear family.

Furthermore, the guides are successful at working within the pedagogical framework to create an environment of openness and acceptance. The pedagogy's birthplace was in the slums of Rome where Dr. Montessori was serving the most underserved children (Majure, 2019). During the second wave of Montessori coming to America in the 20th century Montessori was then primarily serving the wealthier populations. Majure refers to the population Montessori primarily served in American when she describes that Montessori "is a scientific method meant to improve student learning and development that happened to be [initially] used by wealthy parents," as Majure argues, who were looking for the best "educational opportunities for their children and were not content with the public system" (2019: 65). This suggests that much of the politics around access and structural barriers are really cultural, or rather structural issues. They

are specific to the culture of the school which is influenced by multiple factors as stated above. Even when examining the concept of diversity one can see how it is relative and individualized to a specific group (in this case, the school and its community). One must "recognize the limitation that without a recognition of each group's relative power, diversity runs the risk of appearing as a cosmetic fix when deeper surgery is required" (Majure, 2019: 7). It's the group's relative power which speaks to how this is contextualized and cultural in nature.

This school understands the context of the culture in which it exists and works within its pedagogical framework to create an internal culture, a "culture of kindness." Children leave this local school having internalized the Montessori values of openness, curiosity, and basic human respect, showing that the 'culture of kindness' which is fostered and created within the school, helps students from privileged and homogeneous backgrounds to navigate the lack of cultural competency in the broader society.

Understanding the fact that culture is ever present (especially in schools), that each school has its own unique culture, and conducting all educational related research through this lens, will pave the way for more specific solutions to address the gaps in cultural competency seen in the American classroom and beyond. This thesis suggests that a more critical understanding of the ways in which progressive schooling cultures reproduce such exclusions based on their specific culture will allow for more appropriate solutions. Ideally, this would allow children to have a heightened sense of respect towards all humans. It is my contention that a culturally specific approach might allow grand-scale reform efforts in the education system to ultimately pay off and help students learn and grow rather than act as barriers to learning.

__Room for Further Research__

One area of interest that surfaced in this thesis which I feel could be researched in greater depth, is a deeper look at usage and understanding of culture, specifically the ways in which it stood for other, more sensitive concepts. Within the American education system and broader society there is still a high level of discomfort in addressing and learning about socioeconomic and racial differences. There were multiple times in this thesis where I felt that 'culture' was used in a way which was diluting the conceptions of socioeconomic and racial differences. How do people use this term to reproduce systemic exclusion? In what ways does this 'culture of kindness' (which I argued) claim a level of universality to reckon, or not reckon, with the realities of racial, ethnic, socio-economic inequality, and general differences? One could think about the usage of the term as a buffer to help avoid explicitly labeling uncomfortable realities in America which include but are not limited to racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities.

Further research could be conducted on how progressive schools approach and understand politics (broadly understood as power, conflict, or inequality in society) and examine the ways in which they shy away from explicitly stating the way in which educational institutions are largely political. I suggest that if one thinks about 'culture' in terms of the power it actually holds and identifies how it is inseparable from racial and socioeconomic hierarchies it exists within, then the true work of unlearning and relearning can begin. It cannot be ignored that schools are institutions of power and therefore, examining implicit biases and ways in which deeply rooted and problematic systemic issues continue to have a grasp over various parts of educational communities, despite the community members best intentions, is a difficult and uncomfortable, but necessary task.

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