Social Justice Education in an Urban Charter Montessori School

Kira Hudson Banks† and R. Alex Maixner

Saint Louis University

Abstract. As the Montessori Method continues its expansion in public education, a social justice lens is needed to analyze its contributions and limitations, given the increase in racial and socioeconomic diversity in the United States. Furthermore, much of the work in Social Justice Education (SJE) focuses on classroom techniques and curriculum, overlooking the essential work of school administrators and parents, whose work significantly influences the school community. The current study applied an SJE framework to the efforts of one urban, socioeconomically and racially integrated Montessori charter school. We examined the extent to which SJE principles were incorporated across the school community, using an inductive, qualitative, case-study approach that included meetings, surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Administrators quickly adopted a system-wide approach, but parents—often color-blind or minimizing of the relevance of race—consistently resisted. Study results imply a continued need for an institutional approach, not solely a classroom or curricular focus, when integrating social justice into Montessori schools.

Montessori education is often found in elite private institutions, yet the number of public Montessori schools is growing (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector [NCMPS], 2014; Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008). There are approximately 500 public Montessori schools, with a 50-year history in the public sector (NCMPS, 2014). While Montessori schools have traditionally served predominantly White students and children of highly educated parents (Lillard, 2012), the student population within public Montessori schools is becoming increasingly diverse with respect to race and class. Of students at 300 schoolwide public Montessori schools, 56% are students of color and 47% are free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligible (Debs, 2015). Yet, research has found that diversity does not ensure equity of education. In fact, high-performing schools have been found to provide inferior education to students of color, which reinforces the need for schools to intentionally take race and class into account while building an environment where all children can learn (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014).

As Montessori schools become more common in urban education, it is important to examine the extent to which these urban Montessori schools effectively engage Social Justice Education (SJE). In fact, failing to see the context within which Montessori expansion is occurring would be counter to the emphasis that Montessori places on cultural studies. Typically, research on social justice efforts focuses on teacher preparation, classroom techniques, and curriculum. While these factors are important, less attention has been paid to the role of administrators and parents as prominent stakeholders who shape the tone and tenor of the educational experience. For example, a study of Montessori and racial diversity highlighted systemic barriers, institutional biases against students' home culture, and explicit antibias policy as important external factors outside of the classroom that can shape student experience and achievement (Stansbury, 2012). A recent Harvard Graduate School of Education initiative, "By All Means," explicitly goes beyond the traditional student–teacher–classroom scope to highlight ways schools and communities can choose to

support student learning and address common barriers experienced by children and families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Shafer, 2016). The current study examines the roles of administrators and parents in creating an equitable educational environment and, specifically, how SJE can be used as a framework in public Montessori schools.

SJE is defined as a process intended to promote equity across social identity groups (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, nation of origin, etc.) via critical analysis and social action (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006). The five principles of SJE in schools include (a) inclusion and equity: promoting these concepts within the school and larger community and creating a climate that challenges inequities across broad issues; (b) high expectations: the presence of such across all students, faculty, and staff, along with the services and resources; (c) reciprocal community relationships: acknowledgment that the school both gives and receives from the surrounding neighborhood and community and can be a catalyst for outside entities to share SJE work; (d) system-wide approach: assessing and understanding the impact of policies, procedures, behaviors, and leadership on issues of social justice within the school; and (e) direct SJE and intervention: the school's curriculum and trainings that teach equity and model ways to intervene and interrupt in inequitable situations (Carlisle et al., 2006).

Underlying this framework is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which focuses on race and racism in particular, yet also incorporates the intersectionality of other social identities, calling for the elimination of circumstances that inhibit individuals' experience of full rights and freedoms (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This case study examines ways in which an urban, racially and socioeconomically integrated charter Montessori school has incorporated these principles within the school over the course of 3 years.

Efficacy of Montessori with Students of Color

Public Montessori schools have shown positive outcomes for students from diverse racial and class backgrounds (Ansari & Winsler, 2014; Brown, 2016; Dohrmann, Nishida, Gartner, Lipsky, & Grimm, 2007; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006; Mallett & Schroeder, 2015). A quasiexperimental design compared the performance on math and reading standardized state tests across third-grade Black students at public Montessori schools, traditional schools, and other choice schools and found that the students at the Montessori school had significantly higher reading scores (Brown, 2016). A longitudinal study of high school graduates found that those students who attended public, magnet Montessori preschools and elementary schools scored higher on math and science indicators compared to a peer control group (Dohrmann et al., 2007). Similarly, Lillard and Else-Quest (2006) found better outcomes on academic and social measures at ages 5 and 12 for students who were randomly assigned to attend Montessori schools. These data illustrate that Montessori education can be successful in urban settings.

Racial Disparities and Montessori Education

However, it is also important to acknowledge the potential for disparities seen in broader education to also manifest within Montessori schools. SJE is a necessary framework for urban Montessori schools to consider because the majority of students within urban schools, as well as the schoolwide Montessori public schools, are students of color (Debs, 2015; Nevarez & Wood, 2007) and are disproportionately affected by race and class inequities within the education system. For example, recent studies highlight racial disproportionality in school discipline in the Montessori classroom (Brown & Steele, 2015; Stansbury, 2012). While the racial disparity was less robust in the public Montessori setting compared to traditional public schools (Brown & Steele, 2015), findings suggest that Montessori education is not immune to how social identities can affect school experiences.

Furthermore, research suggests that an institutional focus on race and class can be met with resistance (Mildred & Zúñiga, 2004). The pushback to discuss these issues within institutions and schools may be partially explained by the fact that color-blind racial ideology (i.e., the tendency to believe that race does not and should not matter) is pervasive (Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013). Adherents

of color-blind racial ideology may use this approach to decrease the appearance of bias; however, in situations in which race is central, the application of colorblindness can actually increase bias (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). Given the pervasiveness of the approach, it is important for institutions to be race and class conscious and to not ignore the potential effect on school culture.

SJE and Montessori

Both SJE framework and public Montessori education represent a call for significant reform within our educational system. Seemingly disparate, these two frameworks for educating children can be compatible and, together, represent viable shifts from the concepts of schools as factories or children as blank slates. Instead, these frameworks insist that we think holistically about education, taking into account the whole child, community, and culture. For example, the research on teaching in a multicultural society stresses that social justice and student achievement are inseparable (Banks et al., 2001). However, the pairing of a social justice approach with student success is still emerging in Montessori education (Stansbury, 2012).

In recent years, the Montessori community has attempted to articulate the importance of social justice in a number of ways. Approximately 7 years ago, the American Montessori Society (AMS) published a series of articles linking the focus on peace and social justice to Montessori theory (Ungerer, 2009). AMS also published a white paper calling for inquiry into intersections between Montessori practices and culturally relevant curricula for Black students (Hall & Murray, 2011). In 2013, a community of educators began the grassroots group Montessori for Social Justice, which provides an online community and annual conference that share resources on public Montessori and social justice. However, recent initiatives that focused on expanding public Montessori education have not prominently featured social justice conversations.

For example, the Montessori Public Policy Initiative, a collaboration between Association Montessori Internationale and AMS, released a document addressing the essential elements for successful implementation of Montessori curriculum; however, neither culture nor social justice is mentioned (Brown, 2015). Maria Montessori believed that Montessori environments should serve the "complete human being, able to exercise in freedom a self-discipline, will and judgment, unperverted by prejudice and undistorted by fear" (Montessori, 1989, p. 2). Naming the inequitable systems that affect the lives of children of color, children in urban spaces, and children who are from a low socioeconomic background can enhance schools' capacity to teach the whole child and to practice inclusion in the classroom and broader building.

Montessori education, given its recognition of the importance of culture and teaching the whole child, is poised to incorporate social justice (Duffy & Duffy, 2002). Furthermore, Dr. Montessori believed in inclusion—that a quality education should be accessible to all children, regardless of status. The concept of a *cosmic education* asserts that it is essential for students to understand how they fit within the larger world—from the classroom community to their broader neighborhood, country, continent, planet, and solar system (Duffy & Duffy, 2002). In fact, recent research found that children attending Montessori programs showed increased ability to practice sharing and fairness to solve social problems when compared to children attending conventional programs (Lillard, 2012).

Despite these and numerous other areas of potential overlap, the intersection of the Montessori Method and SJE is narrow. The current study examined one public Montessori school's journey over 3 years to intentionally articulate and implement strategies to increase the overlap between SJE and Montessori.

Urban Montessori School

Urban Montessori School (UMS, a pseudonym) began as a Montessori preschool in 1994 in a Midwestern city, in a neighborhood chosen by founding administrators specifically for its racial and socioeconomic diversity. It opened as a charter school in 2008 with 53 children: 53% were students of color,

and 55% were FRL eligible. The school's location was strategically chosen to provide access to quality education for children in the city from a variety of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Currently the school enrolls 197 students: 46% are students of color (predominantly Black), and 41% are FRL eligible (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

The mission of UMS is to prioritize a high-quality Montessori education among diverse students. Early in the life of the institution, the executive directors and heads of school determined social justice to be important, as indicated by their intentional choices to be in the city, in a diverse neighborhood, to focus recruitment efforts on attracting racially and socioeconomically diverse students, and to provide SJE training opportunities for teachers and staff. Initially, the efforts were driven mostly by the executive directors, and UMS looked for opportunities to integrate SJE tenets throughout the organization as the school grew.

Method

Data collection and observation for this case study occurred over the course of 3 years: 2012–2015. The overarching research questions directed to respondents were: How is the school integrating SJE? What are your thoughts and reactions related to the school intentionally engaging in SJE and being racially and socioeconomically diverse? Directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) using SJE as the conceptual framework was conducted to examine the ways in which UMS incorporated SJE. Therefore, a school that had content across the multiple principles of SJE has successfully implemented the framework. Data collection included analysis of four focus groups, 10 interviews, two surveys, and six meetings.

Participants

School administrators (n = 10). School administrators included the executive director, head of school, director of development, assistant director of development, family support coordinator, community outreach coordinator, office administrator, and head of preschool. Ten individuals served across these eight positions over the course of data collection, and staff remained predominantly White. One or two Black women were on staff at different times, as was one Black male more recently; most staff members were women, along with two or three men at various times. Group meetings and a series of individual interviews were the sources of data.

Parents (n = 119). UMS had about 125 families in the charter school. The data for this study came from within-race focus groups attended by 15 parents (Black = 6, White = 9); two Black families reported receiving free or reduced lunch, a criterion used as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Additional data came from 104 responses to open-ended questions related to SJE within an anonymous survey about parents' experience with the school, administered by the charter sponsor. It was not possible to know if the 119 data points represented the same individuals across the multiple methods of data collection, or if they were unique data points. Of the parents who responded to the survey, 71% were White, 21% Black, and 4% identified as Hispanic, and 4% identified as multiracial. The majority of respondents (81%) reported paying full price for lunch; 7% paid a reduced price and 12% received free lunch. Free childcare and food were offered to maximize attendance at events.

Researchers. The first author is a Black professor of psychology who researches the mental health effects of discrimination and intergroup interactions. Furthermore, she has consulted for individuals and institutions on how to implement diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts for 18 years. Her relationship with UMS began when she enrolled her child in the Primary program. Following a pattern of educational researchers who are embedded in the school (Cossentino, 2005), she currently has two children enrolled in the school. She is also employed by the university that holds the charter of the school, and she has served on a number of parent and board committees. Her involvement in this study included conducting interviews and meetings with administrators, in addition to data analysis and manuscript preparation. To balance her personal experience of the school, the first author drew on her professional work as a clinical psychologist,

using self-reflection and objectivity regardless of personal feelings, as well as collaborating with another researcher who was not affiliated with the school to ensure the data were not cherry-picked.

The second author is a biracial graduate student in psychology with a research interest in White parents' racial socialization practices, cultural competency, and use of colorblindness as a strategy to teach their children about race. Her involvement with the school includes two semesters delivering clinical services as a practicum student and collecting data for her master's thesis via focus groups of White parents. Her participation in this project included conducting focus groups with parents and assisting with data analysis and manuscript preparation. Potential biases include seeing the data through the lens of her research on colorblindness. This bias was managed by having an unaffiliated researcher corroborate the results. Both authors attempted to keep these biases in mind as they analyzed data in the study.

Procedure

School administrators were invited to participate in semistructured, one-on-one interviews. Group meetings focusing on the topic of SJE took place during the time of regularly scheduled staff meetings. Interviews with administrators centered on these general questions: How is the school doing at implementing SJE? What, specifically, have you implemented as a part of your role? What do you need to succeed with implementation?"

Parents were invited by e-mail and a follow-up phone call to take part in the focus groups. Given the SJE framework, which acknowledges systemic inequities, we chose to separate focus groups by race and class to ensure all voices were given the opportunity to respond. Parents who participated in the focus groups were provided dinner and then participated in a semistructured, 90-minute session. The protocol for parent focus groups included questions such as "Are you aware of *why* SJE was deemed important enough to be a main part of the mission?" and "What are your thoughts about this aspect of the mission?" Parents were also recruited via an anonymous, online survey about their experiences with the school. Answers mentioning SJE were analyzed as a part of this study.

Data Analysis

Directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) guided data analysis as the five tenets of SJE theory were used as a priori categories. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and then analyzed by the first and second authors. Agreement was reached by discussion. To increase the trustworthiness of the data, the coding scheme was sent to another researcher unaffiliated with UMS (Yin, 2009). Where there was disagreement, the unaffiliated researcher's coding prevailed. The survey results were similarly examined for open-ended responses related to SJE. Subsequently, the results were shared with the executive director to check for confirmability (Yin, 2009), to aid in understanding the data's implications for the institution, and to provide feedback to the institution.

<div align="center">Results and Discussion</div>

Because SJE principles were used to organize the data, the results are presented by principle. Given the desire to protect confidentiality within the small number of the administration sample and the inability to link demographic data to the parent survey's open-ended responses, race and gender are not reported with direct quotes. Discussion of the relevant content and of how it is situated within the larger literature is also embedded within this section.

Principle 1: Inclusion and Equity

This principle refers to the promotion of inclusion and equity within the school setting and larger community by addressing social oppression. In particular, the school has chosen to focus on race and class, given the challenges facing the neighborhood and city.

School Administrators. To articulate the school's long-standing commitment to inclusion and equity, the executive director frequently told how the charter school began as intentionally racially and socioeconomically diverse. One staff member reflected, "[The founder] made an intentional effort to integrate the school racially and economically, from the beginning and over the years. However, both economic and racial integration [were] consistently a challenge." Additionally, the pursuit of equity and inclusion in admissions required extra efforts from the staff.

Administrators described some strategies that UMS adopted to maintain race and class balance, including neighborhood canvasses, positive relationships with local businesses, and publicity in the local Black newspaper. However, during the same time period, the neighborhood began to change, with an increase in higher-end housing. Subsequently, UMS drew a disproportionate number of middle-class—and predominantly White—applications. These factors affected the pool of lottery applicants, threatening the school's core mission to remain racially and socioeconomically diverse. The school also stayed abreast of state and federal guidelines regarding the weight of student demographics admissions. Unlike city magnet schools, UMS was not allowed to take race into account during admissions.

> We [administrators] need to make sure that the applicant pool stays about right demographically, because we aren't allowed to have quotas…. There aren't that many other neighborhoods in the city where we could protect what we are trying keep—our neighborhood model and maintaining a balanced demographic.

Administrators generally appeared to understand that the lack of racial diversity among staff caused some individuals within the school and community to question the staff's ability to champion SJE.

> [UMS]'s leadership has been primarily White and, though the number of staff members of color has increased in recent years, the majority of faculty and staff have consistently been White. [UMS] still has to work to establish rapport and trust with Black parents, particularly low-income Black parents. [UMS] faces an uphill battle as the school strives to maintain its commitment to integration.

This awareness is noteworthy because UMS acknowledged how the school being predominantly White has influenced its ability to recruit Black families. Staff composition was one variable—people of color might not trust that a school that appeared so White was serious about equity and inclusion. Intentionality and investment in relationships over time allowed the school to initially enroll families of color, and that approach is still warranted.

The administration also attempted to be more inclusive by diversifying the donor list in hopes of bringing a wider variety of interests and talents to the school. In addition, administrators expanded the ways families and donors could give time or money (e.g., pizza sales, cleaning supplies, a jazz concert, a formal gala). These multiple entry points are in contrast to schools that focus solely on high-end events (e.g., galas), which can exclude supporters who have less formal networks (e.g., pizza sales). The administration also repeatedly communicated to families that donations of time were appreciated when monetary donations were not feasible. Diverse fundraising opportunities fostered a sense of community, regardless of financial means, yet often seemed at odds with the demands of raising the large amounts of money that were essential to the functioning and growth of the school.

At the beginning of our workshops with administrators, one administrator, who also served as a lead guide, expressed disbelief that Primary-aged children see racial differences: "I don't think they see color." Over the course of the next year, she came to understand that, much as she wished that were the case, this belief did not reflect reality.

> I asked them what they could know by looking at a White, male Primary student. One student replied, "That he's nice." I asked how we know that, and another student replied, "Because he is White." I ended the lesson by reminding them they cannot tell what a person is like simply from skin color.

This administrator's willingness to question color-blind racial ideology and acknowledge how privilege shapes our assumptions was a turning point in her understanding of the importance of SJE and of supporting the institutional focus.

School leadership continued to engage with issues of SJE. A notable result of this commitment was a statement of social justice goals, acknowledging its link with Montessori philosophy and highlighting inequities that exist within the context of the school and society. The statement, drafted by school leadership in spring 2012, (a) articulated the school's commitment to social justice, working toward interrupting and dismantling inequities, and (b) reiterated the guiding framework of Montessori and its commitment to transformation. The statement was further shaped by teachers in fall 2012 and was presented to the board in spring 2014.

Parents. Some families did not initially know that social justice was an explicit focus for the school but were aware of the administration's recent SJE efforts. Parents often asked how the focus on SJE would be implemented: "Sometimes it seems like when people try to be diverse and celebrate diversity that... the White guilt kicks in. So now, anything that's White is, like, bad." Another parent said, "I'm afraid that if we start getting too far into, like, how is everyone different than everybody else, then you start ignoring [that] we are all the same in so many other ways." Another parent said, "I have concerns that the [SJE] work may be taking a higher priority than quality education and oversight of educators."

These responses represent a misunderstanding of social justice concepts and indicate respondents' hesitancy to explicitly address inequity, preferring colorblindness and minimizing the relevance of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Neville et al., 2013). Research suggests that members of a dominant group may not fully understand the ways in which life experiences are shaped by nondominant status (Neville et al., 2013). Therefore, it is common for Whites to express concerns about race and race-related dialogue or policy by minimizing the importance of race or worrying about reverse discrimination (Neville et al., 2013). However, these concerns are not exclusive to Whites.

One Black parent said, "This place is both racially and socioeconomically diverse. But whether or not it's an inclusive place is another matter." Another parent expressed similar sentiments: "Even in this diverse environment that we've tried so hard to create, there's still issues." Several parents expressed the need to find ways to include all parents in the life of the school. One parent said

> They have … meetings, parent action committee meetings at 8:30 in the morning. Well, I go to work so I can't be here at 8:30 in the morning so, you know, I guess there is an economical issue because apparently there's a lot of stay-at-home moms and I want to know who's attending the meetings.

These comments highlight the potential intersection of race and class. Research confirms that class can drive the dynamics of volunteering and resources within a school (Spencer, Reno, powell, & Grant-Thomas, 2009). Whether families had the option for one parent to be out of the labor market or had jobs with more autonomy in scheduling, there was a disparity in who was visibly involved at the school. Attending meetings during the day, volunteering to be a parent-reader during school hours, or attending the principal's coffee hour all require time out of the traditional workday. In that regard, class was also a potential barrier to involvement. Overall, these comments suggest a need for a discussion that will facilitate parents' understanding of SJE and the opportunity for parents to express how they feel the school aligns with the concepts.

Principle 2: High Expectations

School Administrators. UMS worked to be a supportive and nurturing learning environment that held the community to high academic standards as written into the original charter. Expectations and community standards were also articulated via a family handbook, a family contract, and communications from the school. The school adopted the concept of inclusive excellence (Association of American Colleges

and Universities, n.d.) and developed an infrastructure for reviewing academic achievement disaggregated by race and FRL status.

> We aren't just focused on the three R's–reading, writing, and arithmetic. Now it's relationship, relevance, and rigor. In our mission statement, we talk about all students. When an achievement gap exists, then we are not meeting mission. We are creating plans for our classrooms and planes of development so that we become more accountable for student growth and achievement for all.

UMS administration has made clear that it was not acceptable for a subset of students to succeed while others do not perform at their full potential. The school has attempted to institutionally support culturally relevant pedagogy, as evidenced by a committee that explores the intersection of the concept with Montessori methods at the school (Hall & Murray, 2011). From a critical race perspective, this approach is noteworthy because it pushes back against the deficit model of seeing children of color, often labeled *at risk* or *underperforming*, as the central "problem" if they do not conform to White norms (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). UMS, as an institution, attempted to take on the responsibility to see race and culture as assets to be leveraged.

Parents. Each year the school requested that families volunteer 2 hours per month. Parent volunteer activities included helping in the classroom, labeling books for the library, reading to children, assisting with fundraisers, and serving on committees. In focus groups, parents discussed the challenge of active involvement in the school. One parent said

> It's one thing to want to get into [a] great school but it's another thing to come to the parent/teacher meetings and to come to the extracurricular stuff…. I think people are very glad to be here but not engaged 100%.

Another parent reflected, "We need to find a way to get all of the parents there … to try to come up with a language to reach everybody." Both of these comments came from parents whose children were not FRL eligible. While it is possible they speak to the need for the school to improve communication and engagement strategies, it is also possible that these parents are judging other parents unfairly and simply fail to see the numerous ways that parents of lower socioeconomic status volunteer. For example, a parent whose work hours are inflexible but who cuts laminated materials at home is not visible in the same way as a parent who comes in during the day to be a reading parent or to chaperone a field trip.

It is possible that the institution has set high expectations for parent involvement yet also has created barriers that contradict its mission for racial and socioeconomic integration. Previously discussed factors regarding class and volunteering (Spencer et al., 2009) may have contributed to some parents' inaccurate and unfair perception of the involvement of other parents.

Principle 3: Reciprocal Community Relationships

Early on, UMS recognized the reciprocal nature of its work in the community in that the desired racial and socioeconomic diversity relied on the community trusting and embracing the school. However, as discussed earlier, and paradoxically, the school's success and the gentrification of the surrounding neighborhood jeopardized the school's integration.

School Administrators. In 2013, in partnership with other local districts, the school hosted a community panel on urban education, stimulating discussions with key stakeholders about affordable housing in the neighborhood. School leadership attended a number of neighborhood-development planning meetings to represent not only the interests of the school but also the connection between community development and education. Another panel highlighted the financial and development partnerships that made construction of the school's facility possible. In 2015, the school hosted a community meeting for a major research initiative that focused on racial health disparities. Consistently, UMS has partnered with local institutions to highlight issues that are relevant to families in the school and in the broader community. As one administrator articulated,

The changes in our neighborhoods present real obstacles for many of our children. It has become difficult or impossible for their families to afford to stay in their homes. Montessori asserts that, to truly serve the whole child, we must see him or her in context. What happens with a child inside a classroom cannot be disconnected from what happens in his or her neighborhood, and beyond.

From this perspective, Montessori education calls for an understanding of the systemic challenges that affect children, their school, and the broader neighborhood. Recent research confirms that looking beyond the classroom improves school climate and learning (Shafer, 2016). The success of an urban school serving a diverse population of students has inspired a number of entities to want to collaborate with UMS. These opportunities have drawn attention to the art of maintaining integration within a shifting neighborhood and have forced UMS to be choose partnerships carefully in order to ensure the tenets of SJE remain central.

Parents. Critically, parents collectively engage with the community through a series of monthly dialogues hosted by a parent-led committee that is focused on fostering SJE within the school. The series has become popular throughout the city and is now sponsored by the local neighborhood association. Topics range from definitions and terms (e.g., socialization, racism, privilege, institutional dynamics, gentrification, and affordable housing) to activities that simulate oppression, often including a video or brief presentation. Some parents are clearly aligned with this type of community engagement: "I love the [UMS] mission!!! I am very, very excited about the [SJE] and affordable housing work [UMS] has been doing." Another parent responded, "Love and respect what they do in the community and anti-bias work." However, others think the attention is misplaced. One parent said

I feel that the school has prioritized the social aspects of the mission over the academic aspects of the mission. These can coexist and support each other, but unfortunately, I believe that the administration suffers from some confusion about whether we are a community organization or a school.

The disconnect between administrators' collective engagement and parents' more varied responses is noteworthy. The resistance of some parents may indicate opposition to SJE; previous research has documented similar opposition to explicit discussion of controversial topics. (Mildred & Zúñiga, 2004). Furthermore, given the lack of clarity regarding the intersection of SJE and Montessori education (Brown, 2015), some parents may think adopting an SJE framework goes beyond the school's role.

Principle 4: System-Wide Approach

A system-wide approach refers to examination of the institution as a whole, with specific norms and practices, rather than a focus on individuals or positions. A focus on individuals and positions can temporarily improve social justice efforts; however, people and positions change over time. Therefore, it is crucial to keep policy and the broader system in mind.

School Administrators. In 2012, the school leadership recognized that embracing the principles of SJE would not be as simple as buying a curriculum or declaring the beginning of a new era. Examples of system-wide changes include development of a statement outlining the school vision, revamping of hiring procedures, adoption of SJE as a lens for policies and procedures, and meetings:

All of this work has made us want to tighten our policies and procedures. We did a comprehensive policy manual and handbook. When things are left to subjectivity, privilege and racism rear [their] heads, and that's where the problems arise. Consistency across the organization is really important.

Additionally, school leadership was quite aware that it was predominantly White. School leaders made clear that hiring would not occur simply by word of mouth, which can breed homogeneity. The school not only posted openings widely but also reached out to contacts at the city's historically Black teachers

college and advertised in the local Black newspaper. Administrators added language to employment advertisements and to interviews that explicitly addressed the issue of social justice (e.g., "A key part of [UMS]'s mission is to be an actively intentional [SJE] school. What experience do you have in this area? How will you help to lead [UMS] to deepen its commitment?").

One administrator stated, "I think [UMS] is doing a great job of incorporating [SJE] training and activities at all levels of the community: parents, staff, teachers, board, etc." The presence of committees focused on social justice at parent, teacher, staff, and board levels reflects the system-wide approach. The responsibility for being an institution infused with the principles of SJE is not assumed to be at any one level. UMS is aware that analysis and effort across the institution are necessary for success. However, some of the leaders felt more skeptical of the progress: "While I support the school's commitment, it seems to be in word only and not in practice." This comment reflects the tension between day-to-day operation and systems-level change. Conversations with the administration demonstrated that UMS recognizes the lofty nature of its goal: instilling SJE and creating a liberating space for all participants will not occur overnight. As UMS moves toward broader SJE goals, it is imperative that its administration create and implement ways to share feedback. Moreover, the larger community must fine-tune operations and norms.

Parents. Families expressed the need for attention to diversity that extends past students into the institution. One parent said, "Well, for me it always comes down to … whether or not true diversity exists, and not just numerically, but practice. Who makes decisions? How are these decisions … carried out? Who's driving the bus?" Another parent also discussed the need for multiple levels of the institution to embrace SJE tenets.

> If you have a mission for diversity in your student body, you have to have that mission for diversity in your administration at your school board—you just have to. You can't have an all-White school board. I mean, I know it's not now—they have added some people of color on the school board. You can't have an all-White administration.

Numerical diversity—the representation of people—is not sufficient (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Increasing the opportunity and incentives for creating and upholding SJE policies, practices, and norms is an area of growth for UMS. In particular, UMS should encourage parents to reflect upon their own significance in the system at UMS.

Principle 5: Direct SJE and Intervention

School Administrators. Trainings for school leadership, board members, teachers, and parents have provided the bulk of direct SJE interventions. At the beginning of 2012, administrators began a semester-long study of SJE. Rather than start with a curriculum to teach the children, they engaged in learning themselves. In addition, the executive director, head of school, and community outreach coordinator attended a 3-day advanced workshop for organizers of social justice. They also attended a 2½-day workshop on analyzing racism; the workshop is now annual and is attended by teachers, board members, parents, and community partners. Their consensus is that training is needed across stakeholders in the institution. An administrator said

> The [SJE] training is needed on at least a yearly basis, especially to make sure new teachers and staff are included in the training. I think [UMS] is doing a great job of incorporating training and activities at all levels of the community: parents, staff, teachers, board, etc.

Despite this shared vision, the desire for training had to be weighed against other pressing school needs, such as competitive salaries to retain teachers and building expansion. Through strategic partnerships with community agencies and the board's agreement to dedicate training funds, UMS was able to continue to offer trainings.

Parents. In 2013, families were invited to a 3-hour workshop that introduced the ideas of bias, racism, power, and privilege. Parents who attended the workshop (n = 50) watched "Danger of a Single

Story," a recorded TED Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and participated in a facilitated discussion about socialization, social identities, and the definition of racism. Parents who serve on school committees have also been invited to the 2½-day workshop described previously.

One area of need and potential learning emerged in the focus groups. A number of parents expressed hesitation at the idea of talking directly to their children about bias. They were concerned that they did not know how or when to talk to their children or what, specifically, to say to them. Some parents thought their children were too young or that these discussions would be too difficult. This sentiment was expressed across race and class. One parent said, "I don't want to introduce—I just don't want to introduce bias to him." Another parent described the discussion as "a fine line to cross and with the kids, and what age do you? You know, how? How do you approach it? When do you approach it? I don't know if you want them to know. I don't know."

Research suggests that children start to see racial differences as young as preschool age (Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012). Therefore schools and parents, as socializing agents, should be intentional and explicit, rather than vague and noncommittal, about having conversations and understanding children's perceptions (Pahlke et al., 2012). Some parents seemed to believe that talking to their children would introduce bias, not acknowledging that bias already exists in the world. This distinction is important because it is inaccurate to believe that a child does not perceive bias until a parent introduces the topic. Children observe dynamics that inform their understanding of bias before they enter elementary school (Pahlke et al., 2012). Thus, concerns about not wanting them to know about bias or about introducing bias are misaligned with the research corroborating children's awareness. Furthermore, silence can be as powerful as words and, along with reluctance, can be perceived as support for the status quo (Tatum, 2003; Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012). It is important to acknowledge, validate, and engage difference, rather than minimize or be blind to it.

Summary

Our results represent 3 years of UMS's SJE efforts. The data suggest that school administrators have engaged in multiple activities across all principles and in greater depth than has the parent community. UMS intentionally began its social justice efforts by focusing on institutional concerns and leadership, acknowledging that, regardless of the individuals in power, SJE would be embedded into the norms, policies, and procedures of the institution.

It is noteworthy that parents were generally more tentative about the integration of SJE principles than was administration. Concerns about SJE overshadowing academics or garnering undue attention suggest that parents would rather be blind to issues of race and class or do not see the value in focusing on equity (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Neville et al., 2013). This stance may prove to undermine the system-wide approach of the administration. It is also possible that, with increased direct SJE education and intervention, parents may step into a more consistently supportive role in shaping the school culture. It would be beneficial for UMS to more intentionally communicate its efforts and rationale to parents, encouraging them to be partners in the process, rather than remain confused or become dissenters.

The current study adds to our understanding of how Montessori education can work in concert with SJE, but it has its limitations. Lack of generalizability is a major limitation in the study, as SJE efforts at UMS might not be representative of those at other institutions. Another limitation is the nature of the data. Although UMS is a racially and socioeconomically diverse school, the bulk of the administration was White; the parents who responded, too, were predominantly White and paid full price for lunch. Future research on urban or public Montessori schools should make extensive efforts to oversample for families of color and FRL-eligible families. Longitudinal data will also be important for rich learning and for drawing causal inferences. However, it is also critical to report interim data because embedding SJE principles into Montessori theory and practice is an iterative, long-term process.

Conclusion

From the Montessori perspective, the data suggest that increased overlap between SJE and Montessori is possible. Of course, the question of how Montessori will appropriately educate an increasingly racially and socioeconomically diverse student population is not left to UMS alone (Brown & Steele, 2015; Debs, 2015; Stansbury, 2012). Given the increasing number of public Montessori schools, now is an important time to be engaged in exploring social justice work among administrations and parent communities.

Other Montessori schools deliberating how to integrate SJE principles should consider this system-wide approach that starts with school administration. However, as an administration develops a shared language and vision, it is essential that it engage parents and other stakeholders. The explicit identification of race and class as important topics for thorough discussion was met with some resistance at UMS. However, given the prevalence of color-blind racial ideology (Neville et al., 2013) and the broader principles of SJE (Carlisle et al., 2006) and CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), these dynamics are not surprising and will be present inside and across other educational institutions within the United States. Therefore, resistance should not be seen as a reason to abandon SJE efforts. Reflection, openness, and robust feedback mechanisms are essential.

Montessori's expansion into public schools requires explicit acknowledgment of race and class. The efforts of national bodies (Hall & Murray, 2011) and researchers (Brown & Steele, 2015; Stansbury, 2012) provide an approach that focuses on students and curriculum. The data from this study provide a system-wide approach to SJE that was successfully launched among administrators and was more nascent in the parent population, suggesting that SJE has a place outside of the classroom as well. Taken together, these findings support the potential for successful integration of SJE and Montessori philosophy. The pressure to deliver on the promise of Montessori within the public sector may lead some to see SJE efforts as tangential to a Montessori education. However, embracing a framework that tightly connects Montessori and social justice may be central to the continued success of urban, public Montessori education.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

†Corresponding Author

Dr. Kira Hudson Banks† is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Saint Louis University and focuses on race, racial identity, and intergroup relations. She can be reached at kbanks7@slu.edu.

R. Alex Maixner is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychology at St. Louis University.

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