

Preface

Between 2002 and 2007, I taught history in two very different high schools in Massachusetts. My first job was a Boston suburb where the school was the centerpiece of the community. It was the kind of a place where honors class enrollments were prized above a spot on a varsity team and teachers assigned nine-hundred-page Russian biographies for summer reading. But once I got comfortable as a teacher, I began to think about who was missing from my classroom. I had become a teacher in part to address social inequalities, and the students I most wanted to teach weren't to be found in the suburbs.

After several years, I left to teach at the Match school in Boston, an urban charter school serving mostly Black and Latinx students who traveled from all over the city, some over an hour on public transport, to attend the school. I created a literature curriculum dominated by authors of color, and a history curriculum focused on social movements, yet I also entered Match with what I now realize was a White savior complex and assumptions about my students' "disadvantaged" backgrounds. A lot of these assumptions got beaten out of me that year as I learned that many of my students viewed me as one of a series of White educators who dropped in on their childhoods and then left. Why should I be trusted? It didn't help that while I was trying to teach a culturally responsive curriculum to empower my students, I was also tasked with maintaining strict order, punishing students for school uniform violations, incorrect posture, talking out of turn, and numerous other infractions addressed in the school handbook.

In 2007 Match leadership explicitly identified itself as a no-excuses school, a term that Match and other, similar charter schools no longer like to use. The no-excuses philosophy, I was told in my new teacher orientation, derived from the “broken-windows theory” of policing. This practice, involving a crackdown on behaviors like vandalism and littering in the belief that they discourage more serious crimes, is now discredited by law enforcement for leading to disproportionate stops and arrests of young men of color. In 2007, however, it was a model we aspired to emulate in the education sector. When Harvard professors Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, who wrote the book *No Excuses* came to speak at our school, all of the teachers were given copies of the book.¹ By “sweating the small stuff” with our students by enforcing a rigid system of demerits and academic violations, we were told, we could avoid the much larger problems of disorder. This turned out to be only partially true. Though our school sent its graduates to college at a rate far higher than that of Boston Public Schools, many students along the way were either expelled or chose to leave, and those who remained sometimes questioned whether reaching the end goal was worth it.

It also seemed like a great loss that my students at both schools would never get to have a conversation with each other. Perhaps a few of them would meet in college if they were lucky to land in the same place. Both high school communities existed in bubbles, missing a crucial opportunity to learn about the world. I wondered, What would it take for my students to be able to go to school together? And why did my suburban students get to have so much more freedom than my students at Match? It seemed both separate and unequal to accept one kind of education for some children while telling the others they needed something more structured.

These questions became more pressing when I became a parent. Each time my husband and I moved, we wanted to live in cities, but we chose the nearby suburb for the schools. Why was it so hard to find a high-performing diverse school? And how could you create a school model that would support and empower all children?

In New Haven, Connecticut, I started working with a group of parents who were intentionally raising their families in the city and pushing

for change in the district. They hoped to create a new, progressive school that might attract a racially diverse group of families. (Though there are various definitions of progressive education, schools with a progressive pedagogy believe learning is directed by the students, lessons should be designed around the interests of the students, and learning is personalized so that students have control and choices about their learning.)

The parents in New Haven were part of a broader pattern of policy makers, school leaders, and parents stepping up, in the absence of federal or state government leadership, to create schools that were “diverse by design,” meaning schools that were intentionally planned to enroll a racially and socioeconomically diverse student population through the choice of pedagogy, location, and enrollment practices.² We learned that the nearby city of Hartford was home to several racially diverse public Montessori schools that had been created a decade earlier as part of a desegregation court order. Several parents went up to Hartford to visit the schools and came back inspired. What would it take to create a similar school in the New Haven community?

We didn’t know it at the time, but public Montessori schools have been “diverse by design” for over one hundred years and have a presence of more than fifty years as a desirable public school option. Many people do a double-take when they hear that “there are *public* Montessori schools.” Until my late thirties, I had never heard of public Montessori schools, even though there are currently over five hundred of them around the country.³ I had even attended a racially diverse private Montessori school for two years on the South Side of Chicago, and I sent my daughter to a Montessori preschool. But even with this experience, I had never thought that it would be possible to combine the work of urban education and Montessori until I was in the midst of a group of parents doing just that in New Haven.

I volunteered to help, joining the founding board of directors of the proposed New Haven public Montessori school; helping to create the school’s website and communications; and doing community outreach, hiring, and scouting school locations—while working to enroll a diverse group of New Haven families. Throughout, I spent a lot of time moving around stacks of folding chairs for public events. After Elm City

Montessori School opened, I continued to help out at the school during the first year, providing behind-the-scenes support in the challenging startup period.

Meanwhile, I became a PhD student at Yale because I wanted to examine the bigger questions about why schools are still so segregated. With my adviser's encouragement, I started to examine public Montessori and found that there was little research about the movement's connection to school desegregation and school choice or examining the experiences of families of color.

In focusing on Montessori, this book offers the lessons of one progressive pedagogy to the broader work of creating racially diverse progressive schools of choice. Montessori's strict curricular standards and national organizations have both facilitated and limited the movement's expansion. Montessori's desirability and adaptability have attracted a wide variety of parents and educators but have also led to a pattern of public Montessori schools becoming whiter and wealthier with time, sometimes evolving into gentrified schools. Creating and sustaining progressive public schools of choice requires a delicate balancing act, upholding a curriculum while serving all families. My hope is that this project will be useful for parents, researchers, school leaders, and policy makers alike who are looking to learn about what it takes to create racial and socio-economic diverse schools in their communities and what lessons might be learned from public Montessori schools. This book shows what the Montessori movement has accomplished in creating racially and economically diverse schools of choice and highlights the work that remains to be done.

ABOUT RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THIS BOOK

Race is both a socially constructed idea in American society that was created to justify an economic system in which White people have historically dominated, and it also represents shared communities, language, and culture.⁴ The terms we use to talk about race in America are continuously changing as we seek the best language to represent people's identities with respect. In 2019 I use the phrase *people of color* to include

Black, Latinx (the *x* reflects not putting people into a male or female category), and Asian American and Pacific Islanders. I use *Indigenous* to refer to people native to the Americas whose status as members of sovereign nations distinguishes them from other communities of color.⁵ Although there is a debate about whether to capitalize *Black* and *White*, I capitalize these terms in respect for Black identity and at the request of a number of readers.⁶