Ideal Learning for All: Examining the Experiences of Children of Color in Ideal Learning Settings

Iheoma Iruka, Ph.D., Katie Brown, Ph.D., & Adis Liy
University of North Carolina, National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector

BACKGROUND

Racially minoritized learners (RMLs) (i.e., Black/African American, Latine, American Indian, Dual Language Learners) are placed at serious risk of underachievement due to systemic racism, inequities, and the opportunity gap (Aud et al., 2010). High-quality early education is one approach that shows potential to remediate these disparities, but outcomes for RMLs are mixed (Durkin et al., 2022). The long-term goal of this project is to advance a more sophisticated understanding of the definition of "quality" in early learning environments. Implicit in our investigation is the assumption that quality must entail equitable and non-biased opportunities for learning. Those opportunities are visible in the behavior of both adults and children, as well as in the design of the learning environment itself. The specific purpose of this investigation is to explore the experiences of children of color in Ideal Learning settings (Trust for Learning, 2021).

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the experiences of racially minoritized learners in Ideal Learning settings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disparities in opportunity, experience, and performance continue to persist for children of color in early education. And those disparities remind us that factors undergirding the lower performance of these students are diverse and complex, including systemic factors like racial and socioeconomic school segregation (Orfield, 2014; Runberger & Palardy, 2005), inequitable resource distribution (Greenwald, Hedges & Laine, 1996), and disproportionate placements of underprepared teachers in high-poverty schools (Borman & Kimball, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2004). The US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights found in their 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection that Black public preschool children are 3.6 times more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than white preschool children. Black children represent only 19% of preschool enrollment, but represent 47% of preschool children who receive one or more out-of-school suspensions. Work from various scholars, such as Gilliam and colleagues (2016), suggest that implicit bias of teachers may be the underlying cause for this "pushout" of Black children from educational settings, as they view black children as older and more culpable (Goff, Jackson, Allison, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). These factors are likely to make it difficult for Black children and other children of color to receive an equitable, anti-bias high quality educational experience.

Numerous studies indicate that high quality, sensitive, child-centered, and engaging instructions and interactions are linked to children's outcomes and later achievement. As children of color are less likely to experience these types of promoting environments in general education, there is a need to explore whether these are similar in that purport to be child-centered, developmental, individualized, and culturally sensitive.

CONTACT

To contact the authors, please email katie.brown@public-montessori.org

METHODS

The sampling frame for this study included publicly funded Montessori, HighScope, and Reggio Emilia-inspired programs serving 3-6-year-old children, including children of color. A total of 34 classrooms across six school sites were successfully recruited. Though the study included two sites for each model, approximately half of the classrooms in the study were Reggio classrooms, almost one-third were Montessori, and about one-fifth were HighScope. All participating sites served a majority-RML population during the year of data collection.

Researchers conducted classroom observations with two tools: the Developmental Environment Rating Scale (DERS), a measure of classroom quality; and the Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES), a measure of teachers' culturally responsive practices and equitable learning opportunities Each classroom was visited by an observer who spent 30 to 60 minutes collecting data. The DERS was conducted live and in real-time by the observer; the ACSES was scored using video recorded simultaneously by the observer.

All sites served substantial populations of students identified as Hispanic/Latino and/or Black/African American. Write-in responses indicated that many of the students included in the "other" category identify as biracial or multiracial. The socioeconomic status of the communities served by these sites varied widely, ranging from 100% of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch to 10% of students (see Table 1).

Table 1
Student Demographics by Site

Site	% Hispanic/Latino	% Black/African American	% White	% Native American	% Asian	% Other	% Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch
HighScope 1	21.4	27.1	44.9	0	0	6.5	100
HighScope 2	26.8	48.2	12.5	0	0	12.5	100
Montessori 1	33.1	17.2	38.2	.4	1.9	8.6	10.3
Montessori 2	6.1	62.9	17.4	0	6.1	7.6	50.0
Reggio 1	3.0	75.9	19.5	0	1.5	0	68.9
Reggio 2	73.6	20.1	1.9	0	0	.9	100

Though an equal number of school sites per pedagogy participated in this study, the distribution of classrooms was not even. Reggio classrooms comprised half of the classes in our sample. Almost 30% of the classrooms in the study were Montessori classrooms, while one-fifth were HighScope classes; see Figure 1.

Figure 1
Participating Classrooms by Model

Participating Classrooms by Model

HighScope 20.6%
Reggio 50.0%
Montessori 29.4%
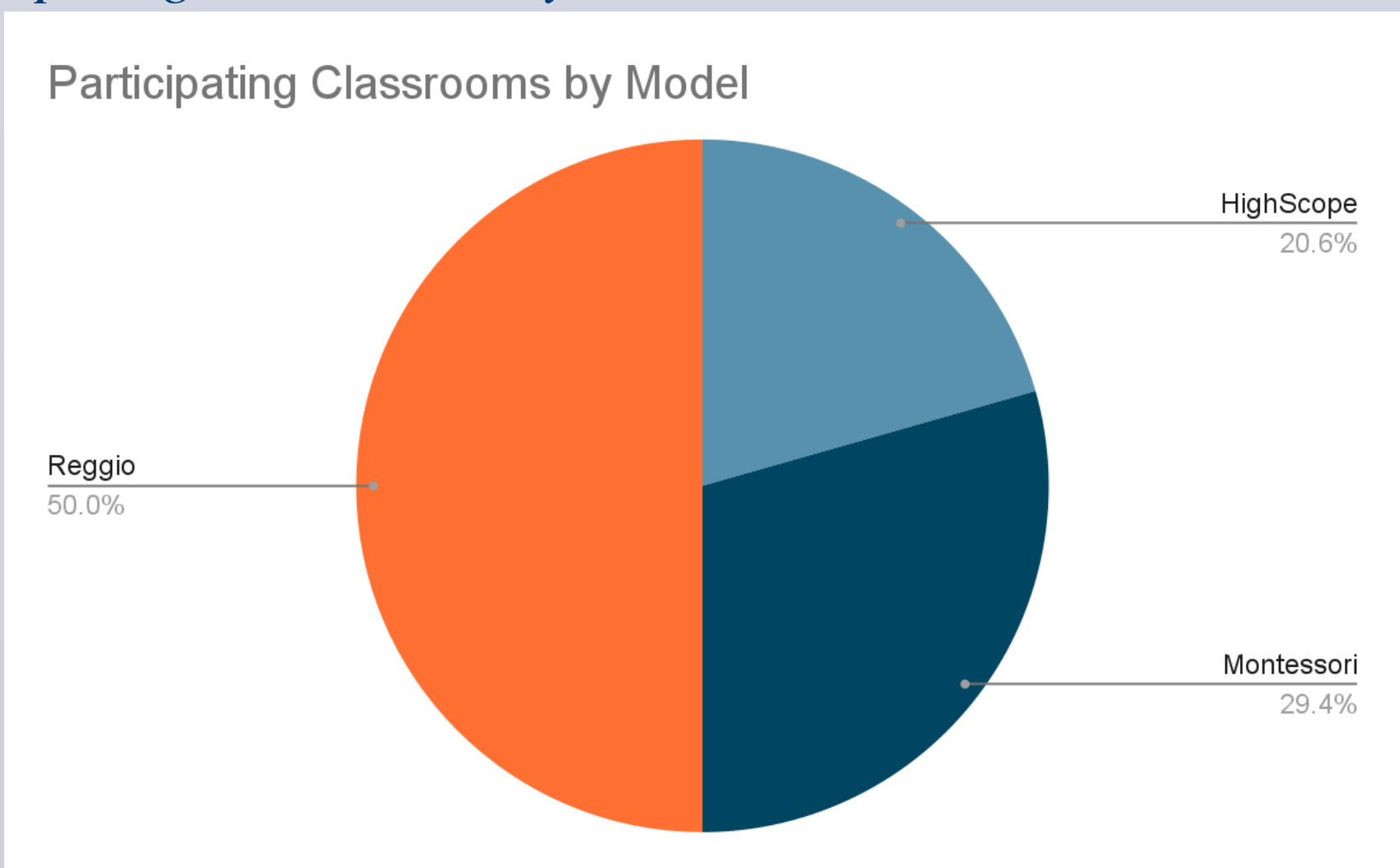
RESULTS

Average DERS domain scores all fell within the Developing score band (see Figure 2). The highest average domain score was for Domain 4, Linguistic and Cultural Fluency. The lowest average domain score was Domain 5, Social Fluency and Emotional Flexibility.

Figure 2
Average DERS Domain Scores

DERS Domain Scores
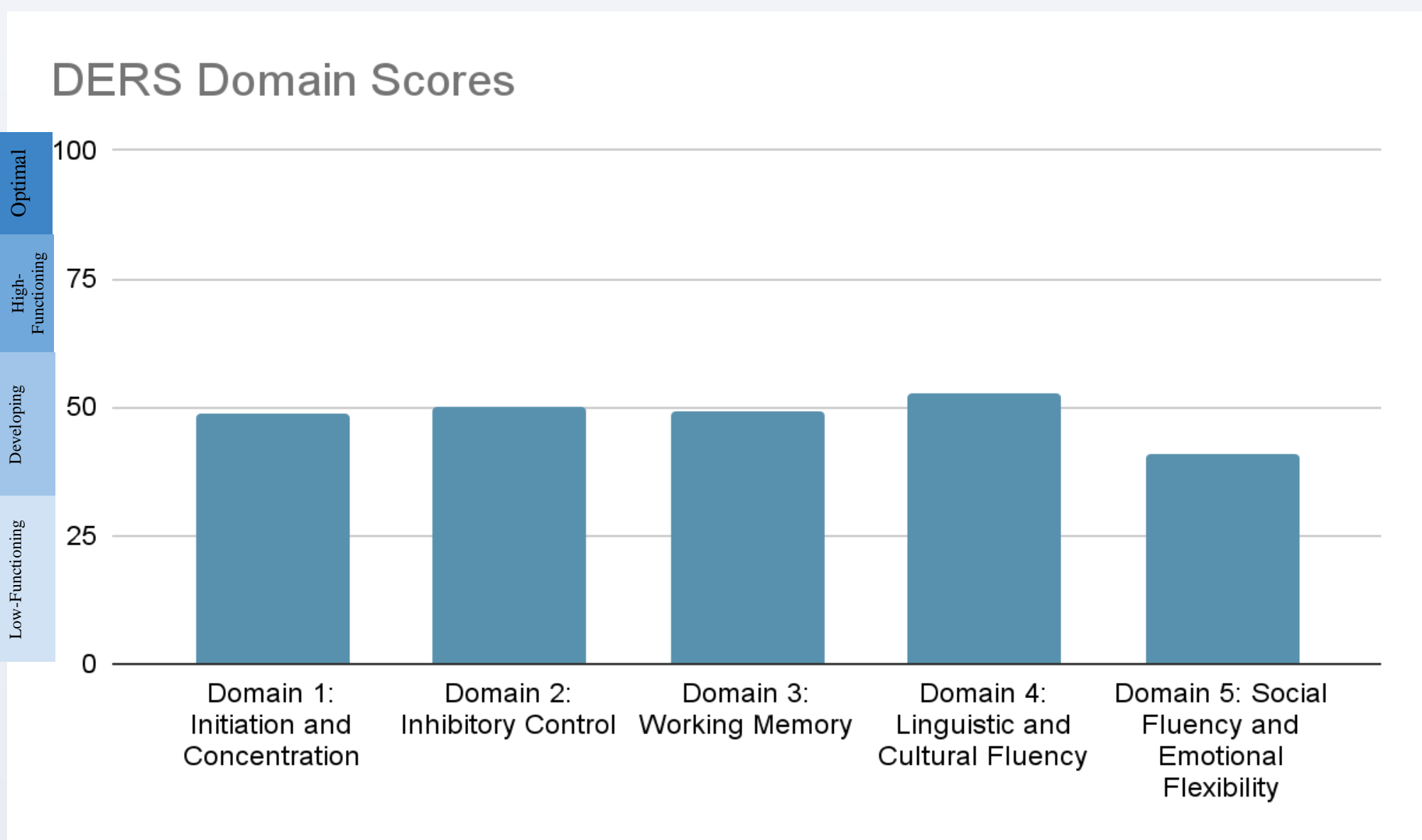
Item-level averages from the DERS reveal patterns of child behaviors, adult behaviors, and environmental attributes. Generally speaking, undesirable child behaviors were less prevalent than desirable child behaviors. Children exhibited high levels of engagement, care, and joy. Adults refrained from interrupting concentrating children and dedicated more energy to instruction than to monitoring work completion. Adults exhibited high levels of warmth, were almost universally calm, and spoke with clarity. The classroom environments were generally clean, outfitted with equipment made from natural materials, and ready for children to enter and work. Few classrooms relied on digital technology for instruction. Some classrooms featured plants, but access to the outdoors, live animals, and food preparation activities were rare.

Average ACSES dimension scores are shown in Figure 3. For the ACSES dimensions, a score of less than 2 is classified as low, while 2-3 is moderate and 4-5 is high. On average (Table 10), the classrooms in this study scored low on Challenging Status Quo Knowledge (CSQK) and Connections to Home Life (CHL). These classrooms earned a moderate score in the dimensions of Personalized Learning Opportunities (PLO) and Equitable Learning Opportunities (ELO). On average, these classrooms scored high on Equitable Discipline (ED).

Figure 3
Average ACSES Dimension Scores

ACSES Dimension Scores
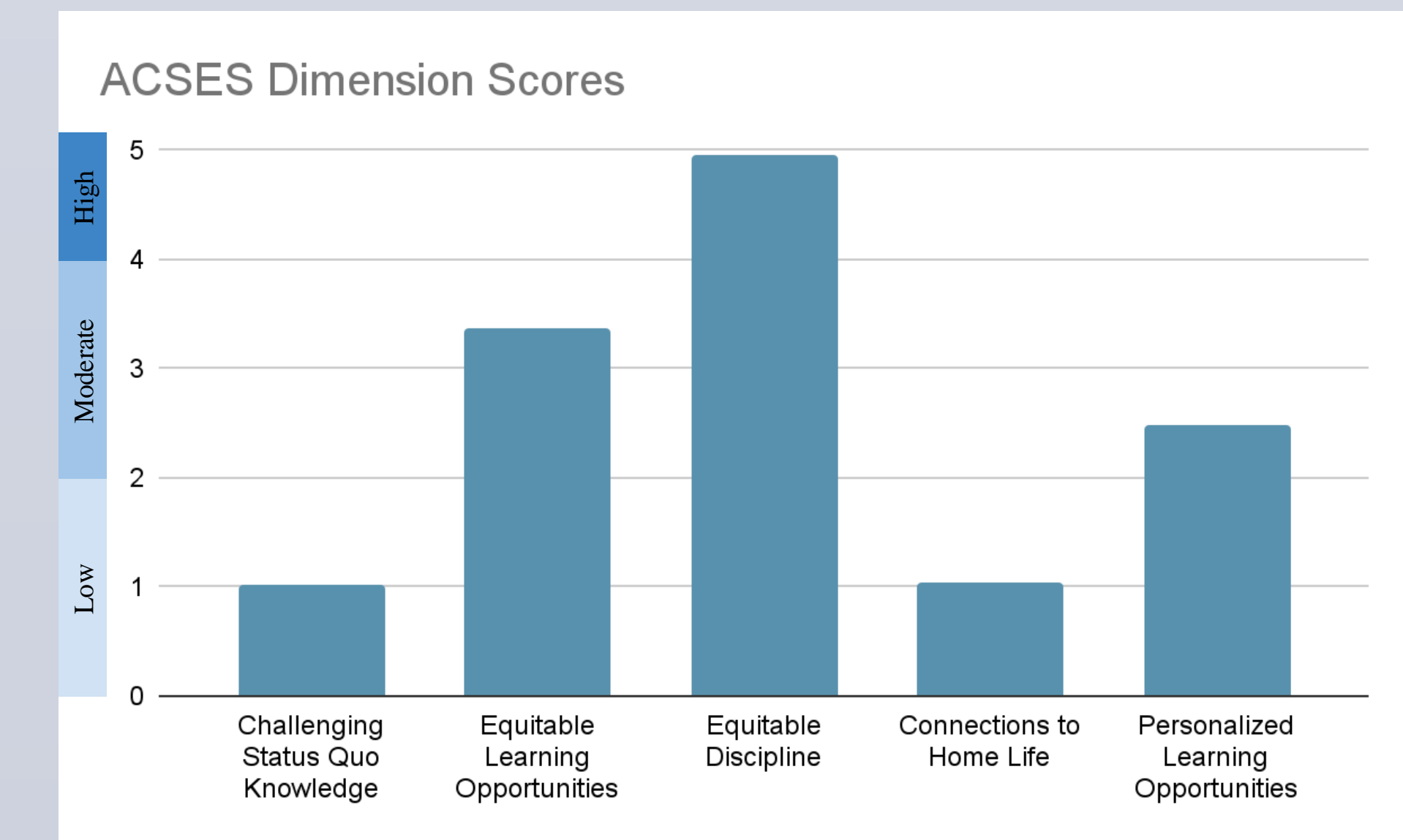
DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, & FUTURE RESEARCH

Racially minoritized learners were in programs that were mixed based on the two measures used to assess quality. Programs were generally rated as developing on the DERS, meaning children exhibited desirable behaviors such as engaging in work and waiting for their turn, adults exhibited desirable behaviors such as warmth and calmness, and classroom environments had favorable characteristics such as being clean and having natural and child-sized materials. Similarly, the classrooms in this study were rated as moderately equitable especially as it related to personalized learning opportunities such as children's given an opportunity to handle materials and equitable learning opportunities such as showing interest in RMLs' ideas by following up. In fact, both measures note that Ideal Learning Programs engaged in equitable discipline practices such as redirecting children using positive language and joy and engagement for children. Unfortunately, ACSES measure noted that Ideal Learning classrooms were less likely to challenge status quo knowledge such as showing RMLs in positions of authority and connecting learnings to children's home life by providing opportunities for children to talk about their home life.

The findings from this study must be put into context. The sample was a small, convenience sample that is underpowered, which limits our ability to conduct rigorous analyses and significance testing. While Ideal Learning programs noted which approaches they used, we did not assess the fidelity of implementation to their ascribed model. Finally, observations represent a snapshot of classroom practices. Teachers may change their behavior in response to the presence of an observer, and our time in classrooms was limited.

These results indicate that Ideal Learning programs provide beautiful, joyful, and child-centered environments that engage children's learning in ways that do not require control and harsh disciplinary practices, a critical concern for Black and Latine families. Nevertheless, there is a need to ensure they are engaging in authentic partnerships with families in ways that are accessible for the diversity of families. There is also a need for these programs, committed to social justice, to examine the extent to which these ideals are fully incorporated in the classroom and program practices in a way that ensures equitable learning opportunities for children from historically marginalized groups.

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