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Assessments in a public Montessori school

Building a culture of inquiry to support Montessori Learners



BY DALE AMIRA MOGAJI

“We shouldn’t have to give assessments in a Montessori school,” is something I’ve heard echoing through school hallways during my career as the leader of a Montessori public school. While some of the overall concern connected to state-mandated as well as local district mandated assessments relates to teacher accountability measures, teacher concerns also stem from the possible disconnect between what is being measured and what is being taught. If the statement above is in fact true, how might we, as a Montessori public school, measure and monitor student achievement and stay in compliance while serving children and preparing them for the global community? Or maybe the

question is, “What are we supposed to do with all of this data? Or, “Okay—we finished testing. Now what?”

As one of 17 public Montessori schools within the district, our students complete their fair share of assessments. Currently all kindergarten through fifth grade students take the Northwest Evaluation Association-Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA-MAP) assessment three times per year, as well as Fountas and Pinnell reading benchmarks and progress monitoring. Third through fifth grade students also complete the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-Step).

As an urban school with a school-wide Title I designation, we serve a diverse population of students who have been impacted by the opportunity gap. On a daily basis, we work towards changing their academic future through the analysis and use of assessment data to support classroom instruction. In fact, as Montessori educators we are engaged in moral stewardship with the very serious charge of ensuring that all students are afforded access to a high-quality Montessori education; assessing and using the data to make sound instructional plans for students is paramount.



Taofik Mogaji assesses his Golden Bead work

In order to reap the benefits of the variety of data points from mandatory assessments, and to use the information to meet the needs of our students, we developed a culture of inquiry within the school. In a public school with high accountability measures, this was no small feat. Within the school community, some participants needed to feel safe discussing issues regarding assessment results, and also to feel comfortable discussing building level, grade level, and

classroom level data. There was also a combination of fear of judgment by other staff members, concerns about accountability and evaluation, and some staff members’ belief that it doesn’t matter what we do as professional educators because “outside factors” will prevent some students from finding academic success in school regardless of our efforts. We overcame those challenges by

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\$3m for public Montessori research from Brady

Can Montessori help close the “achievement gap”?



BY DAVID AYER

“Why doesn’t someone do some research on Montessori to prove that it works?”

That’s a question that has animated the Montessori world for decades. The answer is complicated, and depends a lot on your definitions of “Montessori”, “prove”, and “works”. What counts as

Montessori? What do we mean by “it works”? What would qualify as proof?

But in the last ten years, thanks to the tireless and at times thankless work and contributions of many individuals and organizations, we’ve entered a Golden Age of Montessori research. Beginning with Angeline Lillard’s *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius* in 2008, the five-year, 45-school Furman study in South Carolina completed in 2016, and the launch of the *Journal of Montessori Research* last year, along with many smaller but significant studies and projects, Montessori research has arrived.

A new project from a foundation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina is the biggest move yet in the field. The Brady Education Foundation has announced a five-year, \$3,000,000 initiative to study

Montessori education in public schools. This will fund research at four or five study sites (each of which could comprise several schools), as well as one coordinating site which will serve as a central hub for the network, monitoring data collection and running network-wide data analysis. The project has two main aims:

- to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the impact of Montessori education
- to investigate whether Montessori education moderates the associations typically found between family income and achievement outcomes.

What does this mean? Here’s how this kind of thing works. The project was announced as a Request For Proposals

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How did we get here?

A social justice informed history of standardized testing



BY JACQUELINE COSSENTINO

For the vast majority of teachers serving public Montessori schools, high stakes testing has been a constant feature of their experience as educators. And few are happy about this condition. When

teacher pipeline.

Indeed, assessment, at least as it is currently configured, sends shivers down the spines of most teachers. Complaints typically revolve around two issues. The first is the way the demands associated with standardized testing have narrowed the educational experience of students. The second is an expanding job description for teachers, which now includes analyzing spreadsheets, strategizing about growth, and customizing lessons for the sake of tests. For a growing segment of the teaching force, this combination has proven to be untenable—and not just for Montessori. A 2014 NEA study reports that nearly

an assessment system that, by design, is all about efficiency and sorting is just not consistent with Montessori philosophy and practice. Add race and equity to the mix and the challenges grow even more complex. When human flourishing is the goal, and when obvious and persistent disparities that correlate with race and income exist, and when addressing those disparities is measured, largely, by tests that ignore the goal of human flourishing, what's a principled educator to do?

One way to make sense of this conundrum is to take a closer look at the history of testing in the US. Since we have all been subject to the American educational system, in one way or another, it's easy to think that the system in place is self-evident and immutable. "Traditional"—which is to say, conventional—American education is the norm, and Montessori (along with other child-centered, developmental pedagogies) is the aberration. But, in fact, like the whole of American history, American education's evolution has been, and continues to be, the result of conscious

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Nearly half of U.S. teachers consider leaving the profession due to standardized testing

surveyed, public Montessori educators (leaders as well as teachers) identify the current assessment culture as one of the top three most significant challenges they face, along with funding and the

half of U.S. teachers consider leaving the profession due to standardized testing.

For Montessori teachers, the impact may be even greater. Reconciling an emphatically child-centered pedagogy with

In this issue: Assessment

This issue of *MontessoriPublic* tackles the topic of assessment in public Montessori schools from a range of perspectives: teachers, administrators, outsiders, and historical. We also bring you news and updates from the public Montessori world.

Katie Brown, NCMPS Research Associate, reports on executive function assessment using the Minnesota Executive Function Scale (MEFS).

Ariel Campbell, Allison Jones, and Jenn Schiller, public Montessori teachers in three different schools, share their perspectives on the impact of assessment in their classrooms.

Sam Chaltain, an education writer, school designer, and filmmaker, writes about how flamingos on a fish farm relate to educational assessment.

Jacqueline Cosentino, NCMPS Director of Research, looks back over the history of assessment and child-centered education, uncovering the social justice implications.

Angeline Lillard, Montessori's best known academic advocate, gives guidance for schools on working with independent researchers.

Dale Amira Mogaji, principal at a public Montessori school in Kalamazoo, Michigan, explores the challenges of implementing district-required assessments while staying true to Montessori.

Angela Murray, AMS Senior Researcher and Coordinator, and **Jade Lee**, UNH Assistant Professor of Education, recently presented on formative assessment at the National Council for Measurement in Education.

Elizabeth Slade, NCMPS Lead Montessori Coach, articulates a Montessori response to external assessment pressures.

Sara Suchman, NCMPS Director of Coaching and School Services, looks at how schools have responded to assessment pressures over the last ten years.

Katy Wright, a public Montessori teacher in Helena, Montana, writes about practicing Montessori in classrooms within a traditional school.

NEWS AND UPDATES:

The **Brady Education Foundation** has announced a \$3M commitment to public Montessori Research.

Keinya Kohlbecker, a Montessori guide in Portland, Oregon, reflects on her experience at the 2017 Montessori for Social Justice Conference.

The **Montessori Training Center of New England** and the **University of Hartford** received a \$4.8M grant for teacher training with a path to a Connecticut teacher credential.



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COMING DECEMBER 2017:

Special Education and ELL

How does your school handle children with additional needs? How can we make Montessori work for all children?

Contributions, observations, and letters, on these or any public Montessori topics, are invited at

editor@montessoripublic.org

Cossentino: How did we get here?

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decisions by those in power. What is, in other words, is not so far removed from what might have been or, more important, what may become.

For instance, standardized testing as we currently experience it is a direct descendent of intelligence testing that gained favor in the early part of the 20th century. At precisely the same moment, child-centered schooling was also gaining popularity. While Montessori education was, largely, underground in the U.S. during this period, Montessori's ideas were echoed by John Dewey, Harold Rugg, Thomas Kuhn, and Lucy Sprague Mitchell, among others. Fueled in large measure by professors at Teachers College, Columbia (where Dewey ended his career), and embodied in tony independent schools like the City and Country School in New York, the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Francis S. Parker School in Chicago, child-centered schools were originally designed by and for families of privilege. That's an important part of the story.

Despite its affluent origins, key principles of child-centered schooling found their way into public schools, where they have remained for the better part of the twentieth century and into the present. Innovations such as movable furniture (as opposed desks bolted to the floor), integrated, project-based study, and a general focus on Dewey's principle of "learning by doing" more or less infused themselves into the majority of American public schools. Some locations, such as Winnetka, Illinois, became famous for an especially successful implementation of the approach. Others practiced less effective versions, which, not

surprisingly, led to skepticism among many educational reformers. Critics challenged the approach for a lack of content and a failure to focus on the basic skills necessary for all children—not just those of privilege.

Within this context Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman led the effort to bring standardized testing into the public schools. Terman, along with French psychologist Alfred Binet, launched the movement with the development of the Army-Alpha test, an assessment used to screen World War I recruits in order to determine who among the large numbers of young men might be suitable for training as officers. By 1920, similar versions of this test, which claimed to measure "mental age" or native intelligence, began to be used in US schools in order to identify "gifted" children, and then to track those children into "differentiated" educational programs.

Child-centered schools were originally designed by and for families of privilege

Educational historian Patricia Albjerg Graham links this focus on both sorting and child-centered education with a growing cultural trend toward individualism, which was accelerated by a growing immigrant population, a war time economy, and the social impact of soldiers going to and returning home from military service. Together, these conditions produced an educational focus on "life adjustment," which relied heavily on determining who among the growing numbers of high school students were better suited to professional or vocational career paths.

As Graham explains, the father of "life adjustment" education, Charles Prosser, a white, middle-class Midwesterner, led the vocational educational movement, which not only resulted in increased funding for schools that would prepare young boys for the "trades," but also filtered into the general high school curriculum. Testing, according to Prosser, was needed to determine who went to college (about 20%); who went to trade school (another 20%); and who should receive "life adjustment training" (the remaining 60%).

If you are at all concerned about equity, inclusion, or social justice, you are likely feeling more than a little uncomfortable with this history. That's because all this attention to measuring intelligence in order to determine the life paths of our nation's youth smacks of social engineering fueled by eugenics and institutionalized racism. It's not a

that knowledge and skill should be measured. We are just riffing off the basic framework set by Terman and Binet. And that framework, by and large, is based on two fundamental values: efficiency and simplicity. Human potential, on the other hand, is a complex phenomenon, which presents real challenges to test developers aiming to create a useful instrument.

Assessment is an industry, we are the market, and we can wield market power. All of the mainstream instruments currently on the market—at least the ones purchased by major school districts—are direct descendants of the Army-Alpha, which captured a huge market in the U.S. military because of its efficiency and affordability. The military told Terman and Binet what they needed, and psychologists delivered. We should expect nothing less of today's test developers. If we position ourselves as clients in need of a better product, we can, and should, set the terms of our relationship with the vendor.

Changing the assessment industry is a long game. School survival is a short game. We need to be playing both at the same time. In the near term, we must cope with the current assessment apparatus. Which is to say, mindful of a history that equates Montessori with child-centered schooling, which, for better or worse, is cast as both elitist and ineffective for large swaths of the population, public Montessori schools may not except themselves from accountability. A great deal of work on the ground—some of which is captured in these pages—concentrates on maintaining pedagogical integrity while fulfilling compliance expectations. But holding ourselves accountable doesn't mean accepting the premise of either the form of content of existing tests.

I have argued elsewhere for the importance of rejecting the language of deficits and gaps while at the same time embracing a holistic conception of assessment, one that measures more than basic skills, and that considers the aspects of human development that matter most to the goals of education. The long game can be only be won if we insist on better definitions of success and better tools for measuring success.

Jacqueline Cossentino, Ed.M., Ed.D., is Director of Research for NCMPS.

pleasant chapter in the history of psychology, education, or American social progress.

But it is an important chapter; one that continues to shape educational policy and practice in ways that few question. While the Army-Alpha test is now openly lampooned for its cultural bias, and intelligence testing continues to be roundly panned for its basic assumptions about human development, the form as well as content of the vast majority of tests that dominate our educational system today look remarkably similar to those original instruments. Nearly a century after standardized testing entered the daily practice of public schooling, we find ourselves using an assessment system designed primarily to reify social divisions being used as an instrument for equity and inclusion. The irony is stark.

Even a cursory look at the parallels between the history of child-centered schooling and public Montessori reveals important insights about the intersection of assessment and human potential. Here a few:

Assessment doesn't have to look like this. There is no universal, immutable truth pertaining to what students should know and be able to do, or how

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Mogaji: Assessments

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participating in continual team building activities, increasing proficiency in data analysis, and revisiting and articulating a shared vision which included the expectation that all students can not only learn and achieve, but that they can achieve at high levels as we work to eliminate the opportunity gap.

We use the Michigan Department of Education continuous school improvement cycle (gather-study-plan-do)

observable behaviors within the classroom (i.e. low academic performance, disruptive behavior) are the basis for the meeting, and the overall process uses a variety of data points. During the meetings areas of strengths, challenges, and possible interventions are identified and families are linked with additional resources as needed.

At the end of the day we are Montessori educators with the specific charge of facilitating the development of the Montessori Learner Outcomes. While aca-

As Montessori educators we are engaged in moral stewardship

on an ongoing basis. In fact, the teachers use a smaller version of that cycle, Instructional Learning Cycles (ILC), which requires continuously gathering student outcome data based upon instruction which was directly linked to the results of the previous instruction, as well as the relevant academic standards. Throughout the cycle, they respond to targeted questions that guide the process. In addition, during grade level meetings teachers work together to review student academic data and use it to develop instructional plans. There, teachers work collaboratively as they reflect upon professional practices and discuss the successful implementation of instructional strategies.

In addition, as moral stewards serving students in an urban setting it is essential that teachers reflect upon classroom environment as well as personal relationships with students to determine what factors may prevent students from accessing knowledge presented, as well as developing a plan to eliminate barriers in the classroom that prevent student success. As the school moves toward becoming a totally Anti-Bias/Anti-Racist school, teachers and staff members continuously question whether classroom and school-wide practices contribute to some students benefitting from privileges while other students are marginalized.

Specific child study or building team meetings provide an opportunity for teachers, parents, ancillary staff (school psychologists, speech pathologists, social workers), community mental health liaison, and the school principal to discuss meeting the needs of individual struggling students. Typically,

demic achievement is important it is only one outcome that as Montessori educators we expect our students to demonstrate. The Montessori teacher serves as a facilitator and guide in student learning and the school-wide focus is to facilitate the Montessori Learner Outcomes while developing the whole child.

Within a student-centered learning environment, the expectation is that students leave the school functioning as independent and responsible students and as a result of their experience with Montessori education they demonstrate the characteristics of “Citizens of the World” by showing care for others, the ability to work cooperatively and harmoniously, “Spiritual Awareness” by demonstrating a willingness to help others while being considerate and caring, and “Autonomy”, demonstrated by the respectful sharing of opinions.

Montessori students are guided to become confident and competent students as they achieve academic success without the use of extrinsic motivators. Becoming independent, confident, and socially responsible humans cannot be measured or nurtured through the use of standardized tests but only through the commitment of the Montessori guide to observe and follow the child as she moves along her educational journey.

Dale Amira Mogaji is the Principal of Northglade Montessori Magnet School, an AMS accredited Title I School in Kalamazoo Public Schools. She serves on the American Montessori Society Board of Directors and Montessori for Social Justice Board of Directors.



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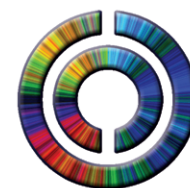
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To measure success, count the flamingos

What a Spanish fish farm can tell us about assessment



BY SAM CHALTAIN

As an educator, I can't think of a more important, elusive, and agonizing question than this doozy: How do you measure success?

So you can imagine my surprise when I discovered a new source of inspiration for how we should answer it, by way of a 27,000-acre fish farm at the tip of the

and fecund marshland. In fact, because it's such a rich system, Veta La Palma's fish eat what they'd be eating in the wild. "The system is so healthy," Barber explains, "it's totally self-renewing. There is no feed."

"Ever heard of a farm that doesn't feed its animals?"

Eventually, Barber asked his host the \$64,000 question: how they measure success. Medialdea pointed to the pink bellies of a thriving population of flamingos.

"But Miguel," Barber asked, "isn't a thriving bird population like the last thing you would want on a fish farm?"

"No," he answered. "We farm extensively, not intensively. This is an ecological network. The flamingos eat the shrimp. The shrimp eat the phytoplankton. The pinker the belly, the better the

how would we measure success then? What would we need to start, stop and keep doing?

For starters, I think we'd want to track every available measure of that child's overall health: mental, nutritional, social, emotional, developmental—and yes, intellectual. We'd stop assuming that schools are capable of being assessed in a vacuum, and start making sense of their effectiveness amidst a larger network of institutions and services (think how much this would change the perception of private schools). And we'd keep looking at existing efforts to apply a more ecological approach to learning, from the Community Schools model, to instruments that help measure a child's sense of hope, engagement and well-being, to individual schools that proactively measure—wait for it—curiosity and wonder, to, yes, the nearly 22,000 Montessori schools around the world.

These priorities would also lead to a different set of questions that could drive future innovations:

- Where else are our children receiving sources of nourishment for their growth and development? Are the connections between those resources and the school implicitly or explicitly drawn?
- What are the components of each

between their different developmental needs?

- How can we better measure the optimal reflections of normalized growth—i.e., self-awareness, self-control, self-direction, and self-satisfaction?
- How much student learning are we expecting to occur in the school building? How else can we leverage the larger community to be an active partner in the overall learning process?
- In what ways are we creating everyday conditions for wonder and curiosity?
- How clearly have we articulated our school's ultimate vision of success, and how clearly do our students and their families understand how what we do each day is in service of that larger goal?

To transform sustainable farming, Dan Barber proposed a new question: "How can we create conditions that en-

able every community to feed itself?

The same lessons of scale are true for sustainable schooling. As Miguel Medialdea puts it, "I'm not an expert in fish; I'm an expert in relationships."

So are America's educators. The central goal of schooling is not to instill knowledge, but to unleash human potential.

The central model for schooling is not a factory; it's an ecosystem. And the central measure of success is not a single benchmark, but a comprehensive ability to affirm the overall health of the systems that surround our children as they learn and grow.

So let's get serious about applying two billion years' worth of proof points in order to build, and measure, the ecological networks our kids actually need in order to learn and grow. It's the only way to find the Pink Flamingos that have eluded us thus far.

Sam Chaltain is a DC-based school designer, writer, filmmaker, and father. You can reach him at sam@wonderbydesign.org or samchaltain.com.

In what ways are we creating everyday conditions for wonder and curiosity?

Guadalquivir river in Southern Spain.

The farm, Veta La Palma, is led by a biologist named Miguel Medialdea. I learned about Miguel's work from a 2010 TED Talk by renowned chef Dan Barber (ted.com/talks/dan_barber_how_i_fell_in_love_with_a_fish), who first became aware of Miguel after discovering just how unsustainable "sustainable fish farming" practices really were.

To produce just one pound of farm-raised tuna, for example, requires fifteen pounds of wild fish to feed it. Nothing sustainable about that. In response, industry leaders have dramatically reduced their "feed conversion ratio" by feeding their fish, well, chicken—or, more specifically, chicken feathers, skin, bone meal and scraps, dried and processed into feed.

"What's sustainable about feeding chicken to fish?" Barber asks his audience, to peals of laughter. Yet there's nothing funny about the ways we have decimated the large fish populations of the world. And there's nothing funny about an agribusiness model that, in an effort to find ways to feed more people more cheaply, has in fact been more about the business of liquidation than the business of sustainability.

Enter Veta La Palma, formerly a cattle farm, and now a sprawling series of flooded canals, flourishing wildlife,

system."

It was at this point I thought about how much of Miguel's work had lessons for our own.

Like agribusiness, education has been shaped by the logic of a single question for as long as anyone can remember. Indeed, just as feeding more people more efficiently has led us into a feedback loop in which we constantly erode our own global supply of fish, educating more children more efficiently has yielded a shell game of metrics that have allowed us to falsely claim success (or failure), when in fact all we have been doing is eroding a different, more precious supply: our ability to fall in love with ideas.

You know this, but it's worth saying again: the ultimate measures of success in our schools cannot be reading and math scores, or better attendance, or higher graduation rates (though those are all good things). These are not our Pink Flamingos, because they are not indicative of a thriving ecology in our schools.

At Veta La Palma, the best way to measure the system's overall quality is by gauging the health of its predators. What is the equivalent measure in our schools? If we started to view our schools less as solitary islands, and more as single links in a systemic chain of each child's growth and development,

community's ecosystem of youth development and support?

- What are our young people bringing with them to school each day—figuratively and literally—and how is our work at school explicitly designed to help them find the proper balance



When researchers come knocking

When researchers come knocking, how to respond?



BY **ANGELINE S. LILLARD**

Occasionally parents, teachers, and school administrators are approached by researchers who ask if their child, class, school, or district might participate in a research study. Sometimes such studies have nothing to do with a school program, but when a Montessori school is approached specifically, the study could be seen as an evaluation or assessment of the Montessori approach. Thus a good reason to acquiesce is it is a free evaluation! For children, participating in a study can be fun, and it is a civic good when the research is sound and will be disseminated. The world can benefit from knowing the results (although any given child's responses are private, so parents will not know how their individual child did). However, some research is not so useful. When should one agree to participate, because the results are likely to be meaningful? Here I lay out some criteria by which schools and parents can judge the likelihood of a research project being worthwhile.

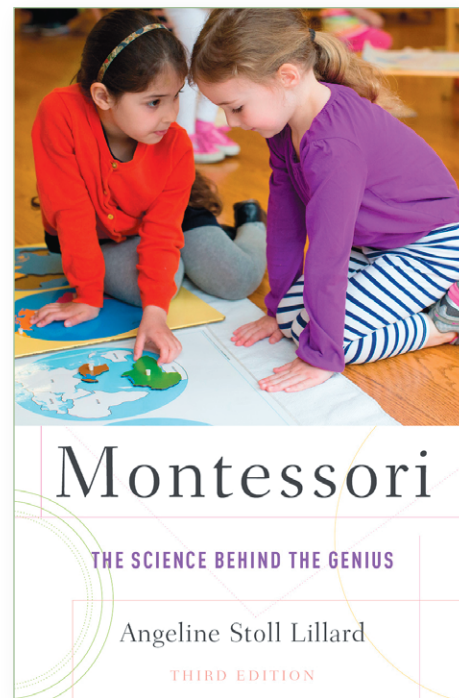
When presented with an opportunity to participate in research, I suggest

organization. Third, look at the publication record. Ideally, they have at least two articles/year in recent years in solid peer-reviewed journals. The solidity of a journal can be checked by inputting the journal name and "impact factor" to a search engine. An impact factor of greater than 1.5 is okay. Note that if someone has a lot of publications, they might feel the need to always aim for high-impact journals, so check a few—or you might recognize some good ones (such as *Child Development*, *Science*, or *Pediatrics*) and not need to look them up at all. Finally, look at their funding record. Top researchers typically get federal or private organizations to cover research expenses. If these four matters pan out, it is likely that the study will be worthwhile. Another approach is to look up a researcher on a website such as Google Scholar, Research Gate, or Academia.edu, which show basic information and how often a person's articles are cited. Very senior people aren't always on such sites, and very new work is often not yet cited, but having an "h-index" of over 20 on Google Scholar indicates a good researcher.

A second angle on whether to participate is to evaluate the study design itself. Historically, a lot of education research involved case studies and ethnographic reports. These can be interesting, but they don't typically contribute to evaluation and assessment goals. With No Child Left Behind in the early 1990s, a concerted effort was made to improve the quality of education research, by establishing the Institute for Education

researchers who continue to be interested in ethnographic, descriptive studies and who do not use data analyses; individuals must decide whether such studies are worthwhile.

A researcher should be able to make clear to you why the research question being asked is interesting, and how the



research design will answer the question. One element to look for is a comparison group. To what is the Montessori group being compared? There are three basic types of comparison group: random assignment, lottery design, and matched variable. The first two get around a pervasive problem in school outcome research: parents.

Parents (and factors such as income level, geography, and race that come along with them) are the single largest influence on child outcomes. Parents contribute genes, which research suggests underpin about 50% of any given human outcome. Parents determine nations and neighborhoods, the number of siblings, whether there is a stable two-parent presence or a series of partners coming and going, and so on. Parents may also determine whether a child is in day care, or goes to sleepaway camp, or is homeless. And parents have different parenting styles and levels of organization and so on, all of which also influence child outcomes. Finally, parents typically choose schools, so it might be the case that certain types of parents choose Montessori. Any apparent Montessori differences could actually be due to differences in parents who choose it versus other forms of schooling.

The gold standard in research is random assignment, and it of course gets around this problem. In looking at the influence of a school program on outcomes, true random assignment is rarely seen, unless a school district randomly assigns classrooms to curricula. In Montessori research, it is very rare.

If one does not have complete random assignment, the next best thing is a lottery design. In a lottery-based study, all the parents chose the type of school, but from among that pool of choosers, assignment was random. Therefore, for the children in the study, whatever variables go along with choosing a Montessori school (perhaps more authoritative parenting, or liking children to have choices) are equal. Ideally in a lottery design study parents can be contacted to participate before they know the lottery outcome, to insure that enrollment in a study is not biased by lottery outcome.

The third reasonable option, when a lottery is not available, is matching samples on variables that might be important. Typically gender, ethnicity, and metrics getting at income or parent education levels are used.

Studies that address these issues are more likely to produce useful results that will help with the assessment of a Montessori program.

Research in school settings by outside evaluators is key to helping better understand how different school programs influence child outcomes. Parents', teachers', and administrators' willingness to participate, and their help in getting families signed up, are crucial to allowing such work to go on. If the work is done well by a researcher with a solid track record of publishing studies in good peer-reviewed journals, there is a good chance it will help the world to better understand Montessori and how it can assist with children's development.

Angeline Lillard, Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, is a leading researcher on child development whose awards include the Cognitive Development Society Book Award for Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius. Her 2006 Science study of children randomly assigned to public Montessori was a game-changer, and she has been keynote speaker at many Montessori conferences worldwide.

Parents, teachers, and administrators willing to participate are crucial to allowing such work to go on.

school administrators take three minutes to find out who the researcher is, by glancing at their "curriculum vitae", or CV, which they should be happy to send on request. (For a student, ask to see their advisor's CV instead.) There are four things to rapidly check on the CV: First, where did the person train—you want someone with a PhD in a research field from a respected university. Second, what is the person's current position? Again, one looks for a position at a solid university or research

Sciences to fund research studies. IES' What Works Clearinghouse website logs valid findings on which school personnel might base practices. (Despite this, still all too often school practices are not based in research—but that is another discussion.) In the last 25 years, education research has increasingly adopted models from medicine, economics, and psychology. In addition, increasingly sophisticated data analysis methods are enabling more fine-tuned results. Still, there are many education

Assessing our own work in the classroom



BY ELIZABETH SLADE

When something isn't quite working, Montessori asks us first to look at the environment and then at ourselves, rather than trying to change the child. Since we are not in the business of "making" anyone do anything, it is instead our task to ignite the natural desire to learn. How? Through a regular practice of observation and reflection—noticing and shifting our practice accordingly.

How does this relate to the pressure of test scores for public schools?

When we consider district, state and national tests our children may encounter over the year there is an immediate tightening that occurs. It feels a bit harder to breathe as we imagine our most fragile students faced with material they haven't yet mastered, or even seen, and being assessed with a method so different from the school's approach to learning. Then, as we picture receiving the school-wide score, and seeing the results of that gap between how students learn and how they are assessed, the pressure mounts to a heavy weight placed upon us—the stone slabs of external expectations. This can result in a narrowed focus, which loses track of the whole child in order to home in on what we believe will help. This constriction can also make us less flexible and adaptable as our thinking moves into survival

goals. But we can be sure that, to the extent testing does measure what children have learned, we have given them the very best chance to learn to capacity. And with fully implemented Montessori, that capacity is sure to surprise us.

If we are considering testing in elementary classrooms specifically, let's consider this from the perspective of the second plane. My observations in a wide range of public Montessori elementary classrooms suggest room for improvement in the balance and quality of work.

"It is certainly necessary to centralize the interest of the child, but the usual methods today are not effective to that end. How can the mind of a growing individual continue to be interested if all our teaching be around one particular subject of limited scope, and is confined to the transmission of such small details of knowledge as he is able to memorize? How can we force the child to be interested when interest can only arise from within? It is only duty and fatigue which can be induced from without, never interest!"

— TO EDUCATE THE HUMAN POTENTIAL, MARIA MONTESSORI

When children are inspired and excited, there is no limit to what they can learn. Here's how the environment and the adult can work together to help all children to learn to their greatest potential.

The Environment

Order models on the outside what we hope will grow on the inside. For the eager mind and spirit of the Elementary child, the order in the Elementary environment is grounding like the person holding the end of a kite string anchors the free flying kite. Often Elementary

group work. Allowing for work at all levels (tables, low tables, floor), distributes both the energy and the noise of work being done. Flow is fed by a classroom equipped with materials children can access independently. And all this relies on shared agreements of how to be in the environment. The Elementary classroom is a laboratory, a library, a think-tank of brilliant minds—a place where extraordinary and important work happens and everyone needs to understand and hold this shared vision.

communicate that completing work is important? Is there a shared understanding in the community that each person is accountable for their own learning, and do the systems support this?

Imagine a classroom with order, flow, and systems—a busy 'practice society' exploring, inventing, solving, mastering and producing work that will change them. This is a place that will produce learners more than equal to any authentic assessment.

- **Questions:** Are the tables set up to allow for both collaboration and concentrated solo work? Are there supplies available for Big Work? Can children get to everything they need in order to follow their questions and complete their work independently? Are the expectations of the classroom clear? Do children move from a place of understanding that their work is very important?

Systems are a critical aspect of the hidden structure in a Montessori classroom. They ground children in a routine that holds the dynamic work they will do, and allow adults to keep up with all the learning that is happening every day. Systems hold everyone accountable for the work that needs to be done and add integrity to it. Without strong systems children can fall through the cracks, run amok, or feel unacknowledged for their efforts. Without strong systems adults can get overwhelmed by the many needs of their multi-aged learners as they try to cover a vast curriculum.

- **Questions to ask:** Are the classroom systems apparent to all? Are they taught every year—reviewing each step or component part? Are the systems adult-driven or adult-dependent, or do they support independence? Do the systems

Ourselves

Adult lesson planning is crucial to the elementary environment. Thinking carefully about what work will happen directly relates to how children develop the skills and tools they need. Lesson planning is sometimes lacking in Montessori training, yet it directly relates to outcomes—if we don't plan where we're going it's likely we won't end up where we want to be. When the adult understands the direct aims and plans the sequence of lessons needed by each child in every subject, the classroom can become a student-centered place where children are free to follow their inner drive to learn.

The classroom lead must also cultivate the three types of work in the elementary classroom, balancing them to support a dynamic and productive community of learners. I use the acronym FOB, the modern day key:

Follow-up work: There is follow up work after every lesson—something the child can do to explore the new concept more deeply. Follow-up work takes many forms and can become dull and repetitive, or it can be exciting and inspiring.

Do children feel the thrill of getting somewhere as they persevere?

mode, hindering our creative responses to students' needs.

As I watch this process in schools across the country, I am inspired to double down on the Montessori, beginning with observation.

We can't be sure that doing the very best, most inspiring Montessori we can will magically improve test scores, when we're not even sure of what the tests are measuring, and their approach doesn't ultimately line up with Montessori's

guides share the same temperament as the second plane child and there can be a sprawl as the year goes on.

- **Questions to ask:** Does the environment inspire orderliness? Is it clean and beautiful? Is there a place for everything and everything in its place?

Flow is both internal and external. For work flow to happen, classroom design must allow for all configurations of learning: individual, pair, and small

- **Some questions to ask:** Is follow-up always the “same old thing” that begins to feel like assignments, or is there creativity in the work? Are there actual assignments of what to do, or an offering of multiple options? Are the children included in deciding on follow-up? Is the work reviewed when it’s done so the children know it is important to complete? Is there a system to manage the variety of follow-up going on from the many lessons?

Ongoing work: Some lessons open into repeated activity for the child. The Grammar Boxes, for example, introduce new parts of speech, and the multiple Filler Boxes help them remember the function of that part of speech. Children choose this work in and around their follow-up work and progress at their own pace.

- Some questions to ask: Is the ongoing work busywork, or is it building persistence? Do children feel the thrill of getting somewhere as they

persevere? How is ongoing work reviewed and the tenacity involved appreciated?

Big Work: Elementary classrooms are dynamic places built around Cosmic Education, with the Great Lessons as the foundation stones.

- **Some questions to ask:** Are the five Great Lessons given early every year? Are these stories infused with the mystery and wonder which will spark the child’s imagination? Are students encouraged to start Big Work that grows out of their curiosity? Is Big Work supported—developing the child’s skills in planning and following through with multi-step projects? Are the discoveries made, and the completion of whatever the child has put their heart and mind into, acknowledged and celebrated?

It can be a temptation in public Montessori elementary classrooms to let the bulk of students’ time and energy focus on ongoing work because it is quantifiable. This not only detracts from the

dynamic nature of the classroom—it also dulls the interest and motivation of the students.

Imagine a classroom where the Montessori adult is planning and giving lessons with this balance of work in mind, and the children are free to immerse themselves in work. Many of the ongoing peer or self-regulation issues might be mitigated as children are drawn into this sparkling, riveting, satisfying experience.

Observation to complete the vision

With this vision of a high functioning Montessori elementary classroom, let us return to the assessment challenge. One way to lift the weight is to cultivate a regular habit of observation and reflection. Seeing how children spend their time will guide you to what needs to change in the environment or the planning. And making those changes will bring you closer to that ideal learning environment.

Whether you are a classroom teacher or assistant, a school administrator or a Montessori Coach, observing regularly will help you see which part of the vision is missing. You could use the questions in each section to reflect on how to make changes to further strengthen the classroom experience for children. Responding to test pressures by turning to (rather than away from) Montessori will not only serve as a support to the greater mission but also prepare children to tackle whatever academic challenges arise, whether that is in the form of an assessment or developing a formula to protect the earth’s ozone. As Dr. Montessori writes in *To Educate the Human Potential*: “The answer to all the contradictions lies in right education, and results can be achieved in no other way, political or social. It requires the influences of sacred and deep things to move the spirit.”

Elizabeth Slade is the Lead Montessori Coach for NCMPs.



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Montessori in high stakes testing environments

Three public Montessori teachers tell their stories

Assessment generally has the greatest impact on Elementary and Adolescent level teachers. To illuminate the actual experience of public Montessori teachers, we checked in with three experienced Elementary guides. Two of the three work in charter schools, and the third in an inter-district magnet school.

Ariel Campbell is an Upper Elementary guide at City Garden Montessori, in St. Louis, Missouri. She is two thirds of the way through an Elementary training program, and in her second year as lead guide.

Jenn Schiller has been a Lower Elementary (grades 1-3) guide at Fort Collins Montessori since 2014. Prior to that, she worked at Gilpin Montessori in Denver.

Allison Jones has been the Child Study lead at Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School in Washington, DC since last year. Prior to that, she worked as a Primary and Lower Elementary guide at Latin American Bilingual Montessori and John Hanson Montessori.

MP: *What causes or caused you anxiety about the testing in your work as a public Montessori teacher?*

Allison Jones: The race to abstraction caused me a great amount of unease. Because common core asks for students to do multi-digit operations so early, I felt a pressure to push them there when some of the students would have benefited greatly from more in-depth practice with Montessori material before learning to put work on paper.

Jenn Schiller: The anxiousness I feel has lessened quite a bit this year. Now that I have third year children that have been with me throughout their

lower elementary years, I know quite well where they are. I also am familiar with the testing expectations.

My biggest personal anxiety is how the parents may respond to a test score—and how they may feel it reflects upon their child, me, the school, and the Montessori Method.

I also tend to feel anxious about working with the children on assessing how much time they have to work through a testing session. This occasionally leads children to feel anxious about the time component (the test being timed).

Ariel Campbell: Anxiety for me would come from the lack of time to try to include so much into a well-rounded program that is Montessori, and also from the reality of having to answer to an assessment that isn't directly aligned with our curriculum. It's like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole.

MP: *How much time would you say you devote or have devoted to test prep?*

AC: Our school is forming the procedures for test prep that best serves the majority of students in the school, that can also be incorporated into regular curriculum activities. We have devoted many hours of work to finding solutions to improve test scores while also serving the students general educational needs. It has certainly been over 30 hours of work throughout a single school year of collaborative work.

JS: We work on academic language pertinent to the test, which may be different from the language we use. This does not take a lot of time, as it is also synonym work.

AJ: There are two kinds of test prep—content prep and process prep. I consider process prep as a part of practical life. I would give students tips on test-taking

procedures (how to use scratch paper, crossing out the ridiculous answers, etc.) and let them practice. In an ideal world, I would have had opportunities for them to practice these skills on the shelf like any other work, but I never quite got there.

MP: *So you find that the “prep” part can fit into your regular LE work?*

JS: For the most part, yes. We (the 3rd year children and I) also spend about two weeks or so looking at the practice test so the children get used to the formatting.

I have been using the Readworks/Newsela programs to support the children in reading non-fiction articles and answering questions about what they read (“finding the evidence”). This has almost become a bit of a supplemental material that you'll find the children working on a couple of times a week.

For math, we do a lot of multi-step word problems.

AJ: I tried to weave content prep into their everyday lessons. Some was just vocabulary—like telling them that people outside our school refer to units as “ones.” Others were teaching them processes—like how to organize their ideas into an essay, and how to include evidence for their assertions. I built this into the reading groups that I did, and started talking about evidence in the beginning of first grade. The rest is just trying to make sure they have enough lessons and practice with the material to be able to move to abstraction on Common Core's schedule, so I would say that part comprised a large portion of my time.

MP: *Do you feel the tests capture what your students know and understand? If not, where were the disconnects?*

JS: I have not seen the test, only practice tests. For me, I guess, the math component seems reasonable

to identify what children are capable of understanding abstractly. I encourage the use of scratch paper, so they can draw the materials out.

It is unfortunate that the children do not have an opportunity to really make connections to other things within the test. The test questions can be very isolated.

We work a lot on “explaining your thinking”. This works out well for some of the word problems on the tests.

AC: I feel the tests do not always capture what the students know due to language differences [i.e., nomenclature on the tests versus what is used in the classroom]. Also, test-driven performance is not a value of the school and student body. Many students in general wanted to do well, but others who have more knowledge did not have that reflected in their scores because of a lack of importance of the test to them.

AJ: Sometime yes, sometimes no. By the time my students were in Upper Elementary, they were more able to show their actual knowledge on tests. However, for the younger students, different types of wording, ability to focus, taking the tests seriously—many things got in the way of certain students performing to level. The most challenging was the disconnect in kindergarten and first grade between what was expected by the tests and what we focused on with the children, especially in the area of mathematics. Most of the kindergarten and first grade test content focuses on logic questions, whereas Montessori guides tend to focus on diving deeply into the concrete world of mathematics—operations with numbers to 9,999, fractions, etc.

MP: *Can you say more about that?*

AC: Sometimes they don't take the test seriously, some may not even complete it. Our students are just more interested in the work of the classroom.

AJ: The students who are naturally organized and logical generally pass with flying colors, but those who rely heavily on the support of Montessori material—as students should—have more difficulty. On the other hand, the language portion of kindergarten and first grade is easy—students who have spent three years doing deep work



Ariel Campbell,
Jenn Schiller, and
Allison Jones

with sounds and sound manipulation can easily identify letter sounds, segment, and blend orally. By the end of first grade, the expectations for reading speed make DIBELS difficult for some students, but overall, expectations align much more on the reading and reading comprehension side than the math side for the early years.

MP: *It seems like there is a fair bit of agreement on what the mandated tests don't capture. Are you saying that the tests should not drive the program?*

JS: At my school they don't. We have leaders that honor and support our work in the classroom. It helps that they also understand that the testing is something we have to do, takes the pressure off. At the same time, we want the children to walk into these tests feeling confident to show what they know. It is also helpful to educate parents (and have admin educate parents) on the meaning (or lack thereof) of the scores.

MP: *What, if anything, might make things more manageable for you as a teacher in this regard?*

JS: I have seen a lot of reading interpretation on the practice tests, which asks for a lot of written answers (in essay-style). This (thank goodness) the children have been able to do on paper tests. Many other schools must take the test on computers. It is daunting to think about an 8-year-old having to compose an essay on a computer. I hope that my students will always be allowed to take the paper tests.

It also helps to see (and expose the children to) practice tests.

AJ: Honestly, if I had a solution, I would have implemented it already. Don't test them until 6th grade? Is that an option? A real answer, though—being able to schedule and proctor all of my own tests within the testing window would give me a much better idea of how to support my students, and allows me to set expectations for the amount of effort that they put into testing.

AC: Having clear and complete assessment standard alignments to curriculum. Especially in Upper Elementary, where there is a lot of uncertainty and lack of clarity in the trajectory of the work as students work towards abstraction.

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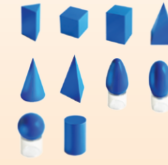
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Assessment: dividing us or building bridges?

Doing public Montessori in a traditional education environment



BY KATY WRIGHT

People from the traditional education world often think that there is no assessment in Montessori education, while people from the Montessori world often think that all testing in the traditional education world is bad. As a member of both worlds, I am frequently both amused and dismayed at the extreme misconceptions both of these education worlds have about each other. I have a public school teacher friend who just completed Montessori lower elementary training. She was stunned by the comments she got about public education from her fellow Montessori trainees, all from, and going into, private Montessori. They seemed to think that all teachers do in traditional public education is make students sit in rows, raise their hands, and take tests. In reality, almost every traditional education public school teacher I know wants to, and is trying to, personalize learning and meet the needs of each of their students—sadly, in an infrastructure not always set up to support that endeavor.

I teach in a Montessori lower ele-

mentary classroom within a traditional public school that houses two lower elementary classrooms and one upper el. Despite our classrooms being in this school for 17 years, we still get comments from the traditional education teachers about how we don't have to abide by district mandates, have higher test scores because we get all of the "good" kids, get all of the parent support, etc.... These comments are not all wrong. The Montessori teachers in our district don't have to abide by district pacing guidelines. We use the district adopted math series by individual teacher choice as supplementary

materials. We do take the district-wide adaptive assessments (STAR, Success-maker, and Smarter Balance), but we do not have to do the district-adopted basal math and language assessments. While we are taking measures to get the Montessori lottery information to more families, our Montessori student body is not socio-economically representative of our larger district student body. After ten years of being a second grade teacher in this district, I went to Montessori training and came back espousing the virtues of Montessori education and preaching to all of my colleagues about how Montessori education can solve all of our problems in public education. No one wanted to listen. I couldn't figure out why. I still can't figure out why. It's like we have two education worlds in my school district, one that serves the students and teachers and supports meeting our district, state, and national standards (Montessori) and one that has teachers pulling their hair out trying to meet individual student needs while dealing with new materials adoptions and new district initiatives designed to, this time, meet student needs and measure progress.

Our Montessori students tend to test higher on our district's assessments than our single grade level counterparts. Our administrators are reticent to disaggregate this data though, because they think it furthers the notion of the inequity of us getting all of the "good" kids. Will we have to wait for our Montessori student body to perfectly reflect

and above level resources. I know from my experience as a second grade teacher that these materials will meet the needs of about five of their 20 students. Then we sit in staff meetings together and analyze our student test scores each quarter. We brainstorm new methods and share new websites. But our Montessori classrooms are labeled "alternative". This is inequity in practice, both

for my colleagues and their students. These other teachers aren't that eager to listen to us tell them about our wonderful Montessori method and materials and take us up on offers to show them. They don't want to hear about peace education and why we shouldn't have rewards and punishment systems, or how our students have more opportunities to practice executive functioning skills. They are tired and worn out and mad at us because of our test scores and because we don't have to follow the same rules.



It doesn't have to look like this...

I wrote a grant to get stamp games and fraction boxes for each grade level at my school so at least students who need remediation or acceleration in single grade level classrooms have something to put their hands on and to facilitate some independent learning for both the teachers' and students' sake. The Montessori teachers have held professional development days in our district for teachers who want to learn more about Montessori education and the materials that allow for individualization, isolation of concept, and control of error. We are trying to build bridges. We are trying to offer to our colleagues some knowledge about a 100+ year old, proven method of education that will make their life and their students' lives easier and better and more efficient and more rewarding. Our Montessori parent group is offering scholarships for our district teachers to

district in the state to be Montessori.

Then, while we are dealing with all of this, we are thinking about the fidelity of our Montessori program. We battle with administrators, sometimes successfully, to get an uninterrupted (except by bells and announcements) 2 ½ to 3-hour work time. We battle to be able to meet with our fellow district Montessori teachers instead of being assigned to go to a grade level meeting. We deal with judgements from the Montessori community about taking the materials out of the context of the whole philosophy and practice and whether that will do more harm than good.

We are trying to make sure we meet the AMS Essential Elements of authentic Montessori programs. We are trying to start a parent education piece of our Montessori program. We are tired and worn out, too! But this is a formative assessment of our issues, not a summative one, and so tomorrow morning, we observe where we are and move forward.

Katy has been working in the Helena Public School District for the past fifteen years, the last five years in a public lower elementary Montessori classroom. Recently, Katy partnered with national and state education leaders to gain Montana state license recognition for graduates from MACTE accredited Montessori teacher education programs.

It's like we have two education worlds in my school district

our district's student body to get people to say, "Wow, this really works?" I struggle with the guilt on a daily basis that I have a range of materials (from pre-K to grade 8) in my classroom that meet the needs of all of my multi-age students in every academic area, that I have the record-keeping tools to observe and monitor my students' progress, that I do cooking and art, and that I have an education community that supports my self-reflection as a professional. The kindergarten teacher in the room next to me, and the first grade and second grade teachers across the hall, get one grade level worth of materials with extra below

mentary classroom within a traditional public school that houses two lower elementary classrooms and one upper el. Despite our classrooms being in this school for 17 years, we still get comments from the traditional education teachers about how we don't have to abide by district mandates, have higher test scores because we get all of the "good" kids, get all of the parent support, etc.... These comments are not all wrong. The Montessori teachers in our district don't have to abide by district pacing guidelines. We use the district adopted math series by individual teacher choice as supplementary

Bridging, buffering, and decoupling

How have public Montessori schools reacted to outside assessment pressures?



SARA SUCHMAN

How do public Montessori schools—schools committed to a system of teaching and learning at odds with much of the public sector’s accountability system— negotiate the boundary between a comprehensive, cohesive, and coherent Montessori program and the curriculum, tests and measures imposed on them by their districts or authorizers? I first asked this question as a doctoral student ten years ago, when NCLB was hitting its stride.

As I look at the landscape now, I still see a daily struggle, but I also see subtle and encouraging shifts in energy and strategy.

Absent external pressures, a Montessori classroom would follow its own curriculum, students would progress through this material at their own pace, and mastery would be largely assessed based on the teacher’s close observation of student work. For classrooms operating in a public setting, however, the accountability system pushes a curriculum derived from state standards, pacing based on externally imposed and standardized expectations, and

environment (for schools, the district, state, or authorizer) is perceived as legitimate and valuable, you see bridging—reaching out to make connections and draw on the resources being offered or imposed. Buffering occurs when worth is recognized but through a critical lens—an openness to the resources but bringing them in selectively, perhaps “Montessori-izing” them. Finally, some schools strive to decouple—keeping the external environment fully at bay in order to focus exclusively on the Montessori program within their four walls.

The biggest impact comes from the leader’s experience with Montessori and the school’s tenure

Not surprisingly, I found that the biggest impact on the strategy that a school takes comes from 1) the school leader’s personal background and experience with Montessori and 2) the school’s tenure and profile in the district. Long-standing and strong schools near other schools (in the same district; under the same authorizer) that have a leader with strong Montessori experience are the most likely to decouple. Young and/or stand-alone schools with principals who are new to Montessori are the most likely to take a bridging approach.

Bridging schools draw on external resources such as district professional

school moving towards the district, not the district toward the school.

Buffering schools are more discerning. A principal with both Montessori and district experience spoke about helping teachers understand how to use district resources in a “Montessori-type” way, including preparation for required tests. Leading one of several relatively new public Montessori schools in the area, his strategy for gaining legitimacy was through performance on the required tests, but he was going to approach these tests in a “Montessori-friendly” way.

Finally, an experienced Montessori trained leader in a district with several longstanding public Montessori schools sought to totally decouple his teachers from the external forces. Through sheer time and prevalence, the Montessori schools in his district had gained, in his words, “favored status” and by presenting a “united front” were able to avoid influences that he framed as “a disruption to our program.”

As we look around today, we still see schools that are responding in each of these ways. So what, if anything, has changed over the past ten years?

The biggest change I see is that, as Montessori’s popularity grows and the number of schools increases, there are more opportunities for schools to gain the benefits of being one of many, part of a legitimate movement and united front, even if they themselves are the only school in their area. The power of shared resources, tools, language and results goes a long way in gaining legitimacy and autonomy for your program.

With increasing opportunity for connection to a public Montessori community, I see school leaders more confident in presenting what their schools offer, whether instead of what the district or authorizer asks or in addition. In other words, though the pressures are the same, the directionality of information flow and push seems to be shifting. The proverbial “meeting half-way” is more likely to actually include work and movement on both sides as the public Montessori community has more resources to share

and becomes more adept and skilled in saying “look what we do, look what we offer, how we measure it and what we need to be successful.”

Sara Suchman, MBA, EdD, is the Director of Coaching and School Services at NCMPS.



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With increasing opportunity for connection to a public Montessori community, I see school leaders more confident in what their schools offer

mastery determined through frequent benchmark assessments. What is a school to do?

There is a well-developed field of research into how organizations of any kind, including schools, respond to their external environments. This literature offers three theoretical models of response, each based on how legitimate or valuable the organization views the external forces to be. When the external

development, curriculum materials and learning specialists with a “whatever it takes” attitude. In fact, one principal in my research saw her role as “indocinating teachers into the district”. Leading the only Montessori school in the district and not fully familiar with Montessori herself, this principal sought to gain legitimacy for her program by meeting the district half-way, but the movement was clearly on the part of the

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Ayer: \$3 million for public Montessori research

continued from page 1

(RFP in research funding jargon) in June of this year, with a timeline for interested parties. Applicants submit a five page Letter of Intent in September, and may be invited to submit a full proposal in January. Some applicants will advance to a final proposal in April, and funding decisions will be announced in June 2018. As five or six proposals will ultimately be funded from the \$3,000,000, projects could have budgets in the range of \$500,000 (smaller or larger depend-

out—how the precepts were supported by theory, and how she laid out what remains to be studied and proven.” At this stage, the Foundation was not well known, the board was casting about for projects to fund, and they literally called Lillard on the telephone to see if she had a project they could support.

As it turned out, she did. Lillard was ready to launch an ambitious follow-up to her earlier research, a three year longitudinal study of 141 children in Hartford public Montessori schools. The study met the Foundations’s two main

community has been able to harmonize many of its differences and present a united front to the outside world. Attention and research such as this is the direct result.

The Research

So what kind of research will this project fund? The guidelines call for a rigorous evaluation of the impact of Montessori. This implies design such as a randomized controlled trial, and “sufficient power to address the outcomes of interest”, which suggests a major university or research institution. The guidelines also specify requirements of the research team:

- sufficient expertise to carry out the proposed activities
- expertise concerning the Montessori approach
- expertise concerning the populations to be represented in the study participants
- strong collaborative relationships between researchers and practitioners
- representation of the community or population being studied

These are guidelines that will give the studies’ findings real legitimacy.

But the main goal of the research is the most exciting element: “an investigation of whether Montessori has an impact on the well-known association between family income and achievement.” This is in many respects the “holy grail” of education research. Since the so-called “achievement gap” came to prominence in the 1960s, especially with the 1966 Coleman Report, education reformers have struggled with little success to overcome the persistent “poverty is destiny” phenomenon in U.S. education. Lillard’s current Hartford research, now under peer review, hints at a role for Montessori in solving this riddle. If five coordinated studies over the next three years can show a strong connection here, the education world may begin to really sit up and take notice.

David Ayer is the Communications Director for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector and Editorial Director for MontessoriPublic.

We’ve entered a Golden Age of Montessori research

ing on their scope). By comparison, the Furman study, at \$370,000, was at the time the largest yet.

The Montessori Research Context


The story of how this came to be intersects with the story of the Foundation itself. The Foundation was created as the W. H. Brady Jr. Foundation in 1954 by William H. Brady Jr. (a founding member of the conservative magazine *The National Review*). The foundation supported local (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) charitable organizations at first, and later expanded to supporting conservative public policy activities until 2001. At that time Brady’s granddaughter Elizabeth Pungello Bruno became president of the Foundation. Bruno, a Montessori child herself and a scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and research assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, led the Foundation in the direction of child development, and it was renamed the Brady Education Foundation.

Bruno knew the foundation wasn’t big enough to do large operational funding—“We’re not Bill Gates big”. What she knew best was the research world, and the need for collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Another Brady board member (and Foundation Executive Director) Barbara Crockett, had been a Montessori teacher, principal (at Bruno’s children’s school!), and school founder. “I had done years of parent education using Angeline’s book (*The Science Behind the Genius*),” she said, “and I loved how she laid it

criteria. First, the Montessori program was strengths-based, sustainable, feasible, and, as a public program, accessible to families. Second, the research was scientifically rigorous: because the schools use a lottery for admissions, it was possible to track the lottery “losers” and create a randomized control group. These criteria help develop data that school systems can actually use, and that can help bigger players (such as Gates) decide what to support.

The Foundation agreed to fund the study, but three years stretched into seven as a large enough sample was built up. Over that period, the Foundation engaged in what Bruno described as soul searching: “We were doing mostly small projects. But were we really helping funders and systems?” Brady began to consider a single, more targeted initiative. Montessori was considered, but wasn’t a lead contender until Lillard’s data started to come in. “We were blown away,” Crockett said, and the non-Montessorians on the board felt the same.

Besides the data, another factor has played into support for this research and other recent projects. It used to be that internal conflicts in the Montessori world were a significant obstacle to outside investment. With little agreement on “what Montessori is” or whose Montessori should count, funders and researchers had no appetite to wade into a contested area. Thanks to the support of the Trust For Learning (as much as they prefer to downplay their role) in organizing the Montessori Leaders Collaborative, a convening of national Montessori organizations, the Montessori



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Formative assessment in Montessori

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BY MONTESSORIPUBLIC STAFF

American Montessori Society Senior Researcher and Coordinator Angela Murray, University of New Hampshire Assistant Professor of Education Jade Lee, and six teachers from Raintree Montessori school in Lawrence, Kansas presented on The Montessori Approach to Classroom Assessment at the National Council for Measurement in Education special conference at University of Kansas in September.

The focus of this session was to demonstrate how Montessori teachers incorporate instructionally embedded

The presentation framed assessment with a definition from formative assessment guru (and one-time senior research director for the Educational Testing Service, the standardized test giant) Dylan Wiliam:

"Classroom activities that provide info to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities." Wiliam identifies five key strategies:

- S1: Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success
- S2: Engineering classroom activities that elicit evidence of learning
- S3: Providing feedback that moves learning forward
- S3: Activating learners as instructional resources for one another
- S5: Activating learners as the owners of their own learning

Montessori teachers use materials to embed assessment in their ongoing interactions with students

assessment in their day-to-day work with children.

From the talk description:

Montessori teachers guide and monitor students' progress through a graduated curriculum on an individualized basis where the Montessori teacher constantly observes the children in order to know where they are in their development at any given moment. Montessori education builds on the premise that competence begets confidence based on a philosophy that the secret to maintaining [student] interest is to keep them challenged. Each individual child's progress is tracked by teachers who follow the student for three years in a multi-age classroom. Teachers gauge understanding by the way materials are handled, accuracy of written work, ability to transfer concepts to new situations, and demonstrating mastery through one child teaching a concept to another."

The session began with a brief overview of Montessori philosophy related to classroom assessment followed by small break-out groups of participants interacting with multiple Montessori teachers (at both the early childhood and elementary levels) who demonstrated how they use materials to embed assessment in their ongoing interactions with students.

The presentation then connected these strategies to elements of Montessori practice:

- Teachers are guides with specialized training who design a prepared environment (S1, S2)
- Curriculum involves specially designed, hands-on materials (S2)
- Three year age groupings (S4) and extended uninterrupted work time (S5)
- Emphasis on independent knowledge-building through internal development rather than extrinsic rewards (S5)
- Children learn at their own pace following individual interests (S5)
- Freedom to choose what to work on, where to work, for how long (S5)

Participants then broke out into small groups led by Montessori teachers from Raintree for demonstrations and discussions of the materials and how they embed assessment in their ongoing interactions with students. The presentation was a great opportunity for the Montessori community to engage in dialogue with the broader field of education to shed light on how our practices reflect many of the current important areas of focus.

Montessori, poverty, and executive function

The executive function intervention for low-income children who need it most



BY KATIE BROWN

Those of us who work in and with Montessori schools often hear anecdotes from non-Montessorians about what delightful and effective young people our alumni are. In the popular press, this phenomenon has been dubbed “the Montessori Mafia,” because so many Montessori kids like Jeff Bezos and Julia Child have gone on to be successful and influential in their respective fields. Neuropsychologist Steve Hughes notes that Montessori kids just seem to be “good at doing things.” We as Montessorians know that the children buzzing around our environments every day are remarkable—but what is this superpower that enables our students to go on to be such extraordinary adults?

Research suggests that Montessori happens to be particularly effective at fostering the development of a set of cognitive skills called executive functions. Psychologists often describe executive functions, or EFs, as the “air traffic controller of the brain.” EFs enable us to deliberately direct our thoughts, atten-

tion, and emotions in order to accomplish our goals. This involves screening out distractions, resisting impulses, and maintaining focus while we simultaneously hold and update information in our minds.

mind and check items off as we collect them. The second is impulse control. Anyone who has spent time with young children knows that this capacity is still very much in development during these early years. The last component, cognitive flexibility, refers to the ability to make a mental shift when tackling a task or solving a problem. A child who goes to the shelf to get the pink tower and discovers that someone else is already using it must exercise cognitive flexibility to develop a plan B for his or her morning. Together, these three emergent capacities allow young children to begin to exercise control over their attention, actions, and emotions—control that is essential to learning, problem-solving, and getting along with peers.

As children mature, having strong EFs often translates into the characteristics and capacities that college professors say they want to see in their students, and employers desire in the workforce. Children who can concentrate and resist their impulses become young adults who can persist in the face of difficulty, adapt to changing circumstances, and self-regulate. Children who become adept at using working memory become adults who can plan their work, prioritize competing tasks, and reflect on their work when they finish. EFs in childhood have been shown to predict various measures of academic achievement, including SAT scores, high school graduation, and college completion. Not surprisingly, EFs are also linked to non-academic

outcomes, including social-emotional skills and even marital satisfaction; the ability to regulate one’s emotions and control impulses is key to positive and successful interactions with others.

more likely to lag behind. Given the centrality of EFs to learning, some researchers even theorize that this discrepancy in EFs may be an underlying cause of the well-documented “achievement gap” between low-income children and their more privileged peers. It is these children that have the most to gain from exposure to an educational intervention that fosters the development of EFs, such as Montessori.

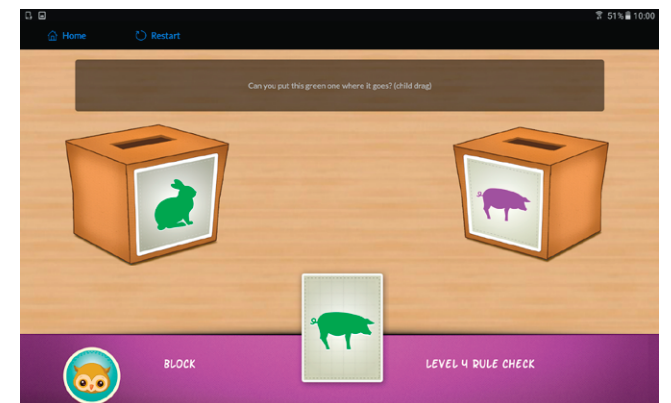
Clearly, when we think about outcomes that matter for optimal development for children, EFs count. Historically, many assessments to measure EFs have been used primarily by researchers because they can be cumbersome to administer. However, a new tool called the Minnesota Executive Function Scale (MEFS) makes it much easier for practitioners to assess EFs in schools. (MontessoriPublic covered the MEFS in an article by its designers in the December 2016 issue.) NCMP has been providing training in the MEFS for Montessori schools and piloting the assessment in several locations. Preliminary results from two public Montessori schools provide some insight into how exposure to Montessori helps children develop EFs.

Children were tested in fall and spring of the 2016-2017 academic year. The first school was a new Montessori charter school in the mid-Atlantic serving predominantly middle-class three- and four-year-old children. On average, these children scored at the 47th percentile in the fall and the 50th percentile in the spring. Essentially, these children started the school year with levels of EFs that more or less matched expectations based on their age, and continued to perform on par for age at the end of the year.

The second school was also a relatively new public Montessori school in its second year of operation serving children ages three through eight. This school serves a very high-need community; 96% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals. On average, these students scored at the 36th percentile for EFs at the start of the school year, suggesting their levels of EFs were somewhat low for their age. Given the socioeconomic characteristics of the student population,

this finding was not surprising. By the end of the school year, however, the average score had risen to the 41st percentile. In a single year, these children made significant progress toward closing the gap between themselves and their more affluent counterparts.

In both schools, the data reported here reflect the growth experienced in just a single year of Montessori. Since



The MEFS assesses executive function in children

both schools are relatively new, the students tested have had no more than a year or two of exposure to Montessori. It is possible that as students accumulate more years of Montessori experience, growth will become more pronounced. In both settings, the children who grew the most were the children who started the school year with the lowest scores. Both of these findings affirm the value of Montessori for promoting the development of executive function for children who are most in need of support.

In both settings, growth in EFs also varied somewhat by classroom. This suggests that the development of EFs may be related to variations in the learning environment. NCMP continues to investigate this phenomenon by pairing the MEFS with the Developmental Environmental Rating Scale (DERS), a classroom observation tool for developmental learning environments. By using these two tools together, we hope to be able to document a relationship between fully implemented Montessori and growth in executive function. Furthermore, we hope to identify the elements of the learning environment that have the most impact on EFs. This could help Montessori teachers maximize opportunities for children to develop these critical skills.

Katie Brown is the DC Regional Coordinator for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

What is this superpower that enables our students to go on to be such extraordinary adults?

tion, and emotions in order to accomplish our goals. This involves screening out distractions, resisting impulses, and maintaining focus while we simultaneously hold and update information in our minds.

In early childhood, children are developing three foundational components of executive function. The first, working memory, is the ability to hold information in mind while working with it. As adults, we use our working memory when we go to the grocery store with only a mental list of the items we need—we have to hold this list in

outcomes, including social-emotional skills and even marital satisfaction; the ability to regulate one’s emotions and control impulses is key to positive and successful interactions with others.

Thus, we know that executive functions predict an array of later outcomes for children. However, the research also indicates that one of the largest factors in predicting an individual child’s level of EFs is socioeconomic status. Children from middle- and upper-class families are much more likely to come to school with highly developed EFs, while children from low-income families are

"Where do I go from here?"

A Montessori teacher's reflection on the 2017 Montessori for Social Justice Conference



BY KEINYA KOHLBECKER

This past June, several of my work colleagues and I had the pleasure of attending the Montessori for Social Justice (MSJ) Conference in Houston, Texas. During those four days, we were immersed in an experience that was gratifying, cathartic, and healing.

This conference brought together many individuals who seek to be catalysts of change in the Montessori community. Through the lens of social justice, we continue to improve upon our preparation of the environment, which continues to support each child in their self-construction as citizens of the world, who genuinely have respect for themselves and others.

Some individuals reading this may say, "This is not a new concept in the Montessori community." Correct, it is not a new concept. Yet, we need to dig deeper into this work of social justice, to develop explicit plans within our schools and the neighborhoods surrounding them to establish a more equitable, inclusive, welcoming community. We need to be explicit with our actions as Montessorians, not just to bring forth a "better understanding" of inequities, but to be able to identify when inequities

of race, gender, economic income, ethnicity, and religion are present within our world, within our country, and most importantly, within our learning environments.

Once we have this knowledge, how do we translate this to the children in our classroom? With two summer months to reflect and further educate myself on these topics, I needed to ask this question over and over again.

When the MSJ conference ended, I made a concerted effort to reflect on the numerous themes, discussions, moments of clarity that I experienced during that time, and I began to discover MSJ themes that resonated with me. After several weeks, these were recurring themes for my own professional development and spiritual growth: 1) Reclaiming my Identity as a Montessorian of Color and 2) Committing myself to continue the mission of Anti-Bias/Anti-Racist practices in my school community and the world around me.

and history, I am incorporating this personal part of my life into my work as a guide, which enriches my personal experience when building community with my students and school community on a whole. This be as simple as incorporating songs into the classroom culture like "This Little Light of Mine" or Ella Jenkins tunes that are reminiscent of my family's southern rural roots, to being more open in sharing my perspectives with my colleagues without feeling guarded with my choice of words. For example, I do not feel as guarded when speak up about injustices in the community surrounding us, and that our school community still does not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the neighborhood surrounding our school. Overall, this practice of reclaiming my social identity has given me validation to establish better rapport with the children and my colleagues.

Along with the commitment to reclaim my true self as a person of color,

etc.) and how they are equally valuable in the community.

I know that this process to develop a community that engages in ABAR practices as its culture won't happen overnight. This practice will take time with much processing and "unpacking" for each staff member, parent, and child. One small, yet significant exercise to begin this practice in my classroom is to have a gallery of photos from each family, for all of the children to see on a daily basis. Conversations such as "you have two moms" and "your dad has a different skin than your mom," initiate dialogue amongst the children and adults about the similarities and differences of the families in our school community, and how each family has something special to offer. I can already see the different families in my classroom. What better way to begin to foster a welcoming energy of acceptance in the learning environment?

I have been a part of the Montessori community for 16 years, and I am moved and energized to have been a part of this conference on Montessori for Social Justice, this past June. After nine months in the classroom, I was ready for several days of presentations, discussions, and networking with other colleagues. Topics of race, economic income, gender identification, and equity were main themes in this conference that truly resonated with me, as I could relate to them on a personal level. From the moment, I saw a video on highlights from the 2016 MSJ Conference, I knew that I wanted to be a part of this community which would congregate in Houston for 2017. The conference in Houston held promise for me, and knowing that it would be filled with various people, who are Montessorians of Color, Montessorians from the LGBTQ community, Montessorians working in education policy, and Montessorians advocating for education to ALL families was a clear message that Dr. Montessori's legacy continues in the 21st Century. We have a lot of work to do, both in public or private programs, but together we can send a message that we stand in solidarity for social justice in our nation and on this earth.

Keinya Kohlbecker is a Primary Guide at Harmony Montessori School in Portland, Oregon. She has been a part of the Portland Montessori community for 15 years.

Social justice is not a new concept in the Montessori community. Yet, we need to dig deeper into this work, to identify inequities in our learning environments.

To reclaim my social identity as a cis woman of color, I realized that I needed to seek and continue to develop myself as a person in order to establish a better rapport with other individuals in my profession. This means working with the children as well the adults in my school community.

By continuing to build my confidence and connecting with my family

I can also begin this commitment of developing and implementing Anti-Bias/Anti-Racist practices in the learning environment. As I prepare the environment, I continue to look through the lens of ABAR and its significance in honoring not only the personal identities of my students, based on their personality, but their social identity (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, family income,



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BY MONTESSORIPUBLIC STAFF

The University of Hartford (UHart) and the Montessori Training Center Northeast (MTCNE), an AMI teacher training center in Hartford, Connecticut, have received a Walton Family Foundation grant of \$4.8 million for a new program combining a bachelor's degree with an AMI diploma and creating a nearly-direct pathway to a Connecticut public school teaching certificate.

Connecticut already offers a teaching certificate pathway for AMI diploma holders with a bachelor's degree. The pathway, known as the Unique Endorsement #110, emerged from a previous partnership among the UHart, MTCNE, and the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), which operates the training center as well as the CREC Montessori Magnet School, Connecticut's first public Montessori school.

The endorsement typically requires twelve additional Masters-level credits and allows teachers to work in any of Connecticut's four public Montessori schools. Endorsement holders can take additional steps (but need no further coursework) to qualify for a full teaching certificate, which has reciprocity with many other states. This new program incorporates the additional credits required for the endorsement into the bachelor's degree.

The precise pathway from this bachelor's degree to the full certification is still under discussion, so this effectively puts Montessori teacher training almost,

but not quite, on par with conventional teacher preparation.

MTCNE graduates have been eligible for the Unique Endorsement since its inception, as a bachelor's degree is a criterion for admission. However, this program opens a pathway for students without a bachelor's to complete that degree and the AMI diploma at the same time, and to access financial aid. Full-time tuition in the University of Hartford's bachelor's program runs about \$38,000. Already, nine students (four full-time, five part-time) have been admitted to the program, and \$138,000 has been awarded in scholarships. UHart has committed to maintain the percentage of Walton scholarship aid granted to each student across their time in the program, so a student receiving 50% support this year can expect that to continue to ensure program completion.

UHart also offers a Master's in Education program for AMI diploma holders, but this requires a bachelor's degree for entry. The Elementary Masters does support the Unique Endorsement while currently Primary does not by itself confer the Unique Endorsement or a conventional teaching license.

The project is funded by the James Walton Fund, an independent philanthropic initiative run by James Walton, Walton is the grandson of Helen and Sam Walton, founders of the Walton Family Foundation and Walmart. Walton has supported other Montessori initiatives in recent years, including organizational development work for the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (which publishes MontessoriPublic).

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