

My journey teaching ESL in Public Montessori

Moving from multicultural to culturally responsive



BY BRITT HAWTHORNE

I am a former public Montessori elementary teacher from Rockford, Illinois now working in Houston, Texas. Even as a “general education” teacher, I have always had English Language Learner (ELL) students in my classes, but our move to Houston, one of the most culturally diverse cities in the United States, has expanded my ELL definition. The population I have worked with here has included immigrant children from undocumented and documented families, refugee children, children whose parents are migrant workers here for the harvest season, ELLs with a disability, ELLs with dyslexia, U.S. citizens, children learning English as their third or fourth language, and more. Teaching ESL is not limited to teaching learners

to become proficient in standard English—it includes a linguistic celebration validating cultural experiences and expressions. It is affirming their identity and home language.

ESL as conventionally practiced isn’t really radical. In fact, I have found Montessori instruction to outshine ESL practices. Dr. Montessori understood the importance of vocabulary building in relation to the child’s environment, giving context to the vocabulary words, the study of grammar to aid in reading and writing comprehension and the organization of ideas for clarity. All Montessori learners are expected to read, write, and discuss across subjects and across grade-levels, supporting language acquisition.

In the beginning of my Montessori journey, I worked to prepare an environment that promotes multiculturalism, as discussed in my Montessori training. Multicultural education celebrates diversity through diverse books written by people of the global majority, cultural nomenclature cards such as Diamond Montessori’s peacemaker/world changers cards, Read Around the World night and Holidays Around the World celebrations. It is a visual way to



Building fluency at Houston ISD

address inclusivity, according to Zaretta Hammond’s book Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain.

But I began to realize that, while multiculturalism creates a welcoming environment, it does little to impact the individual English language learner’s cognitive growth. Multiculturalism is only adding the peanut butter to the bread; I was still missing the jelly. What I needed to address was the false sense of reality sometimes represented within

the larger Montessori community and especially the inequities in public Montessori programs. My jelly is culturally responsive pedagogy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) goes beyond the visual culture of multiculturalism to consider each student not as a representative of their culture, but as an individual influenced by social and cultural forces within and

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Is Montessori for every child in 2018?

With so many new challenges, is Montessori still relevant?



BY SILVIA C. DUBOVOY

The rise of learning disorders

In recent years, Montessori educators have seen many more children with exceptionalities in their classrooms. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) calls the rise in childhood neurological disorders, mostly described as behavioral, social, or academic dysfunctions, a “major health

threat”. Doctors in the U.S. have written millions of prescriptions for Ritalin and other medicines to treat ADHD alone. In 2015, in the U.K., nearly a million such prescriptions were written, up from 661,000 in 2010 and 359,000 in 2004. (“Prescriptions for Ritalin and Other ADHD Drugs Double in a Decade”, *The Guardian*, 8/14/2015) In the last decade, we have seen a proliferation of theories, therapies, books and research on all kinds of disorders. The 2013 revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) added a chapter on disruptive, impulse control, and conduct disorders marked by behavioral and emotional disturbances specifically related to self-control.

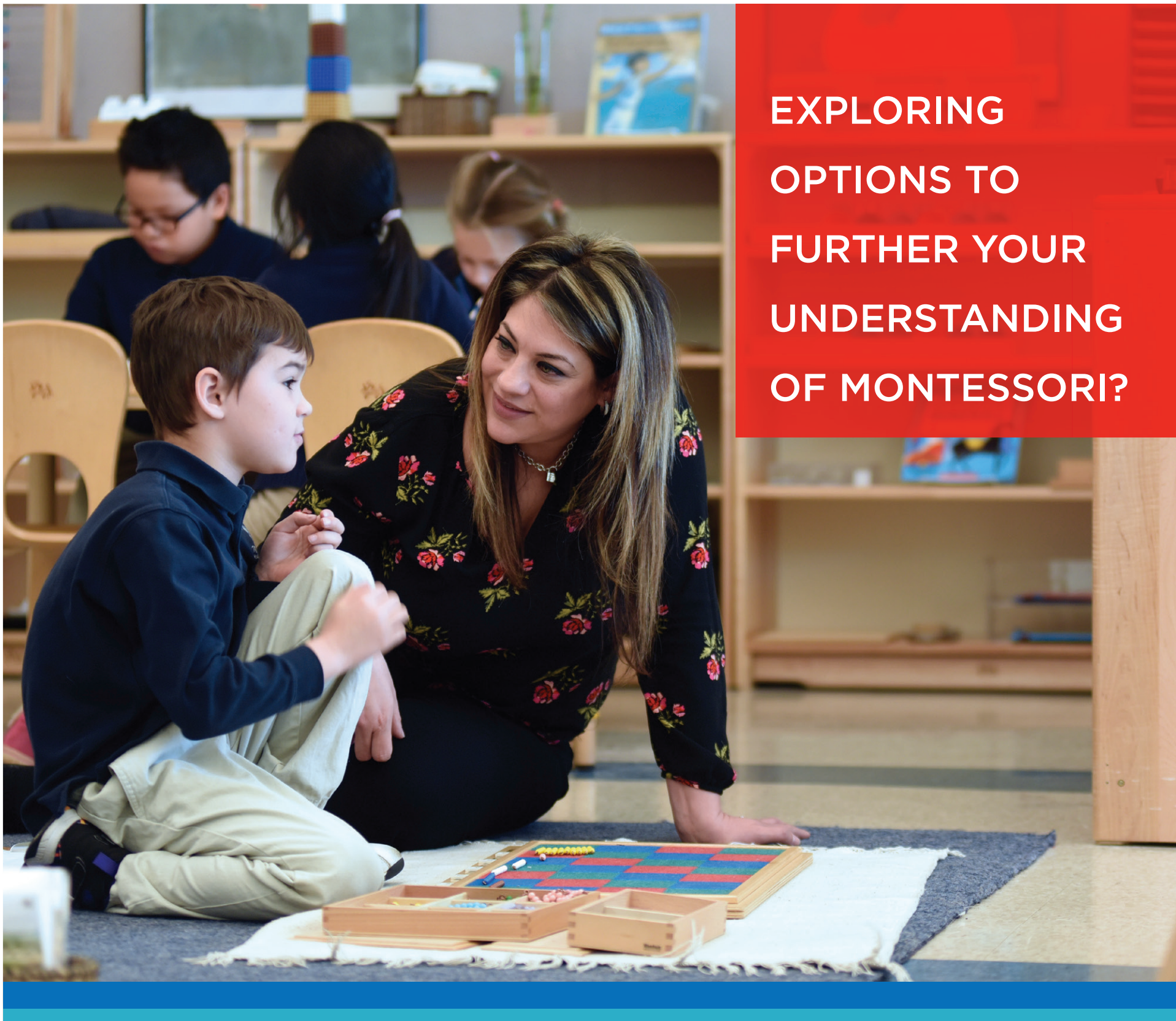
In the midst of this global epidemic, educators are on the front lines, making

valiant efforts to understand this growing population of children and to meet their diverse and various needs. In the Montessori world, we sometimes wonder if our beloved approach to education truly works “for every child”.

Montessori and inclusive education

As a teacher, a psychologist, and an AMI Montessori teacher trainer, my hunger for knowledge to serve children has led me to constantly study the human condition. Immigrating from Mexico to the United States as an adult also made me feel handicapped in many aspects. My quest and my limitations gave me the motivation to constantly prepare

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Welcoming specialists into high-fidelity Montessori



BY LIESL TAYLOR

Children are human beings to whom respect is due, superior to us by reason of their innocence and of the greater possibilities of their future.

—Maria Montessori

Just as every child is human, every child, in all of her loveliness and complication, deserves an education that promotes her development to the fullest human potential.

The Montessori community is fast moving away from the notions that children with special needs can't be well served in a Montessori environment and, even worse, that serving those children compromises the Montessori experience for others.

To implement a system of education in environments that appropriately demand the use and development of all our human tendencies, fostering optimal development, we must insist that it is for

every child, and work tirelessly to make it so. At Cornerstone Montessori School, this work has two pillars: staying absolutely grounded in the implementation and protection of high fidelity Montessori, and tapping and integrating the expertise of specialists and outside resources so important to supporting the guides and the success of all children.

The benefits for children with special needs as well as the children living with them in community are indisputable. Consistently, we see our special populations thrive developmentally and academically. We see the profound effects

key components of Montessori. Quite the contrary: these very components bring about the most meaningful change in the lives of children with special needs, as for all children. Sadly, so many well-trained Montessorians let the implementation of these principles slip, especially if they are struggling to meet the needs of children with significant challenges. When we work in public settings with diverse groups of children, we must stay unwaveringly grounded in our commitment to provide high quality Montessori, especially for children with significant deficits. Our country

We must insist that Montessori is for every child, and we must work tirelessly to make it so

living and working together in a community diverse in need on our children's increased capacities for understanding, compassion, cooperation, and problem solving for the good of the whole.

Do 'more Montessori', better

In serving children with special needs, we must never compromise the

has followed fad after educational fad, making desperate grabs at what might "close the gap", agreeing only that so far nothing is working, when all the while we have a scientifically proven method of education that supports the development of each human being to his or her fullest potential.

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In this issue: ELL and Special Education

This issue of *MontessoriPublic* presents a range of views on meeting the needs of children with learning challenges and English language learners in a Montessori context.

Silvia Dubovoy, an AMI 0-3 and 3-6 teacher trainer and founder of AMI's Inclusive Education course, gives us a deeply theoretical overview of special needs and inclusion.

Gena Engelfried, Head of School at Golden Oak Montessori Charter School in California, asks us to consider the parents of special needs children.

Britt Hawthorne, a public Montessori elementary teacher in Houston, Texas, shares her journey from multicultural to culturally responsive education.

Allison Jones, a primary and elementary trained public Montessori teacher and Child Study Lead at Breakthrough Montessori Charter School in Washington D.C., describes the NCMPS Child Study protocol.

Christine Lowry, founder and consultant at Montessori Now, give an overview of the inclusion model.

Gretchen Shaheen, a public school teacher and student of Montessori education, shares her observations of

Montessori and ELL in the New York City Charter Montessori School.

Liesl Taylor, head of school at Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School in St. Paul, Minnesota, describes how high-fidelity Montessori can work hand in hand with specialists and outside support.

Kacee Weaver, Assistant Director at Maria Montessori Academy in Utah, shares her school's story of transitioning to an inclusion model.

The case for push-in services, an NCMPS White Paper, is published here as well.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

Public Montessori raises achievement, closes gaps: Dr. Angeline Lillard's recent groundbreaking study in Hartford public Montessori schools found that

Montessori can close gaps in achievement across economic subgroups.

Public Montessori in Puerto Rico tells the amazing story of Ana Maria Garcia Blanco, the Instituto Nueva Escuela, and the 50 public Montessori schools on the island.



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The Child Study Protocol at Breakthrough

Finding the right
Montessori
intervention
for every
child



BY ALLISON JONES

The greatest sign of success for a teacher... is to be able to say, 'the children are now working as if I did not exist.'
—Maria Montessori,
The Absorbent Mind

The quote above can be daunting and even disheartening to many public Montessori teachers. When your classroom and school are filled with a lottery-selected mix of children, many with special needs, no previous Montessori experience, spotty attendance records, who may have experienced trauma and likely haven't had any breakfast, along with children who have been in Montes-

fall into one (or more!) of the categories described above. That means I have come to terms with the fact that by June, some of my students will definitely not be working as if I don't exist. In fact, if one student learns to work independently for ten minutes while I walk out of the room this year, I will consider it a win. A few may never work as if their guide or aide doesn't exist for more than a few minutes at a time. Yet, these facts do nothing to contradict my commitment and belief that these students can benefit from a complete and joyful Montessori education.

I have been both a Montessori child and a Montessori teacher (at primary and elementary levels), and that experience has shown me that Montessori education is the opportunity to do real work that meets specific physical, intellectual, and developmental needs. It gives children the tools to be as independent as possible, physically, socially, emotionally, and academically. It allows them to take joy and pride in their own abilities, and to persevere through challenges.

Most of all, these opportunities are, by design, available to all children

sori schools since before they were three, and know without thought that four is yellow and five is light blue, this goal can seem an impossible task.
As the Child Study Lead for Breakthrough Montessori PCS, I am responsible for all interventions and special education services. Breakthrough is midway through its second year, with 135 three to six year-olds, most of whom

Most of all, these opportunities are, by design, available to all children.
There are a few things that have allowed us here at Breakthrough to start the work towards providing this transformative experience for all children.

Child Study

Child Study is a protocol designed by the National Center for Montessori in

the Public Sector. Guides and assistants gather weekly to plan interventions for one child who is having difficulty in his or her classroom environment.
This has several advantages over the traditional SST (Student Support Team) model. First, all interventions are Montessori-based; actions that fit in with the pedagogy that the guide just might not

Rules for interventions

Montessori guides are taught to “follow the child” and to “never help a child with a task at which they think they can succeed.” However, these two central tenets of Montessori become more complicated when we are referring to children with special needs, children who have experienced trauma, and chil-

Montessori guides are taught to “never help a child with a task at which they think they can succeed.”

have thought of yet. Second, its central tenet is to reframe inquiry from “What is wrong with this child” to “What is going on with this child”?
The protocol enables guides to consider lagging skills that may prevent a child from participating fully in the classroom. And, the protocol prompts us to work within our Montessori practice to bolster those skills through targeted Montessori interventions. Finally, because the protocol is always a group experience, both the presenting guide and supporting group benefit from the process of collaborative problem-solving. The presenting guide gets external perspective that they desperately need when faced with a frustrating situation. The team as a whole gets to spend an hour a week talking in-depth about real children and real practice. “Stealing” insights and interventions for their own classrooms is strongly encouraged.

Child Study is still a work in progress at our school, but it has provided insights into what is going on with a number of children who were struggling; sometimes insights that are surprising. Furthermore, it provides a framework for helping Montessori guides reconcile the need for both real Montessori and rigorous analysis that can be shared with the non-Montessori world. Child Study also serves as both an aid to, and a protection from, the special education bureaucracy.
Detailed records of targeted interventions can be used to support the eligibility of students who are found to not make progress, and students who might otherwise be referred to special education can be guided towards normalization by the insights gained through and interventions designed during the process.

dren who are for whatever reason not yet working joyfully and independently. It is clear that some children, in order to access the Montessori environment, need supports and/or accommodations. Just as our primary and elementary students work in different ways, it is unfair and unreasonable, for example, to ask a child with severe ADHD to regulate her own behavior at the level of her neurotypical peers without some kind of additional supportive structure. As Montessorians, though, we never want that support or structure to take away from her own right to be an independent, fully functioning member of the classroom who drives her own development.
The line between what is too much help (infringes upon a child's independence) and too little help (ineffective and doesn't allow for the child to participate fully) can be quite thin. To help us analyze our interventions and make sure that they are an aid to the child's development, there are two rules we have worked out:

- **Interventions must support internal skill development, instead of externally reinforcing or extinguishing behavior.** Our interventions are designed to teach children skills that they have not yet mastered, not to “pay” them for desirable behaviors. For example, while giving a child a star every time he sits down may prompt a child to sit, this behavior does not necessarily transfer across environments. On the other hand, if we give a child extra acknowledgment every time he sits down with the idea that sitting down is the first step towards an experience of successful work, and that once he experiences the joy of completing self-chosen work he will

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no longer need those extra acknowledgments, we are helping that child develop the skills of concentration, and inhibition, which ultimately lead to self-regulation.

- **Interventions must be designed to fade away.** Before we start an intervention, we have a plan for how it will be phased out. If the intervention is check-ins with an adult outside of the class, there is a plan for how, once the intervention shows success, those check-ins can be spaced further and further apart until they are no longer necessary. If the intervention is to spend a transition time at a special activity away from the group, there should be a plan in place for the slow, supported reintegration of the child into the transition. The only exception to this, in my opinion, is children with physical needs such as sensory integration disorder, or children who need extra movement in order to function successfully in the classroom. In the case of needs that are physical necessities, fading may not be an option.

Finding amenable service providers

One great help to us in the messy, complicated process of providing high quality Montessori to all the children who show up at our door has been finding like-minded service providers. Over our first two years, we've managed to find a cadre of occupational therapists, speech therapists, psychologists, and behavioral analysts who believe in what we are trying to do, and who are willing to learn and adapt their own practice to Montessori pedagogy. While we are trying to find the interventions and supports that will help our students to thrive, having partners who believe that the Montessori environment is right for our students has been of paramount importance. Between the internal practices of sound Montessori and support for children with additional needs, and the external support from specialists who really understand what we're doing, we have been able to help some children go further than anyone imagined possible.

Allison Jones, M. Ed., is Child Study Lead at Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School, in Washington, D.C. She holds AMI Primary and Elementary diplomas.

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MontessoriPublic is a digital and print communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori, presenting news and information about public schools, publicly supported programs, public policy, and relevant ideas and events in education.

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Transitioning to inclusion

**Our three year journey
towards inclusive
Montessori**



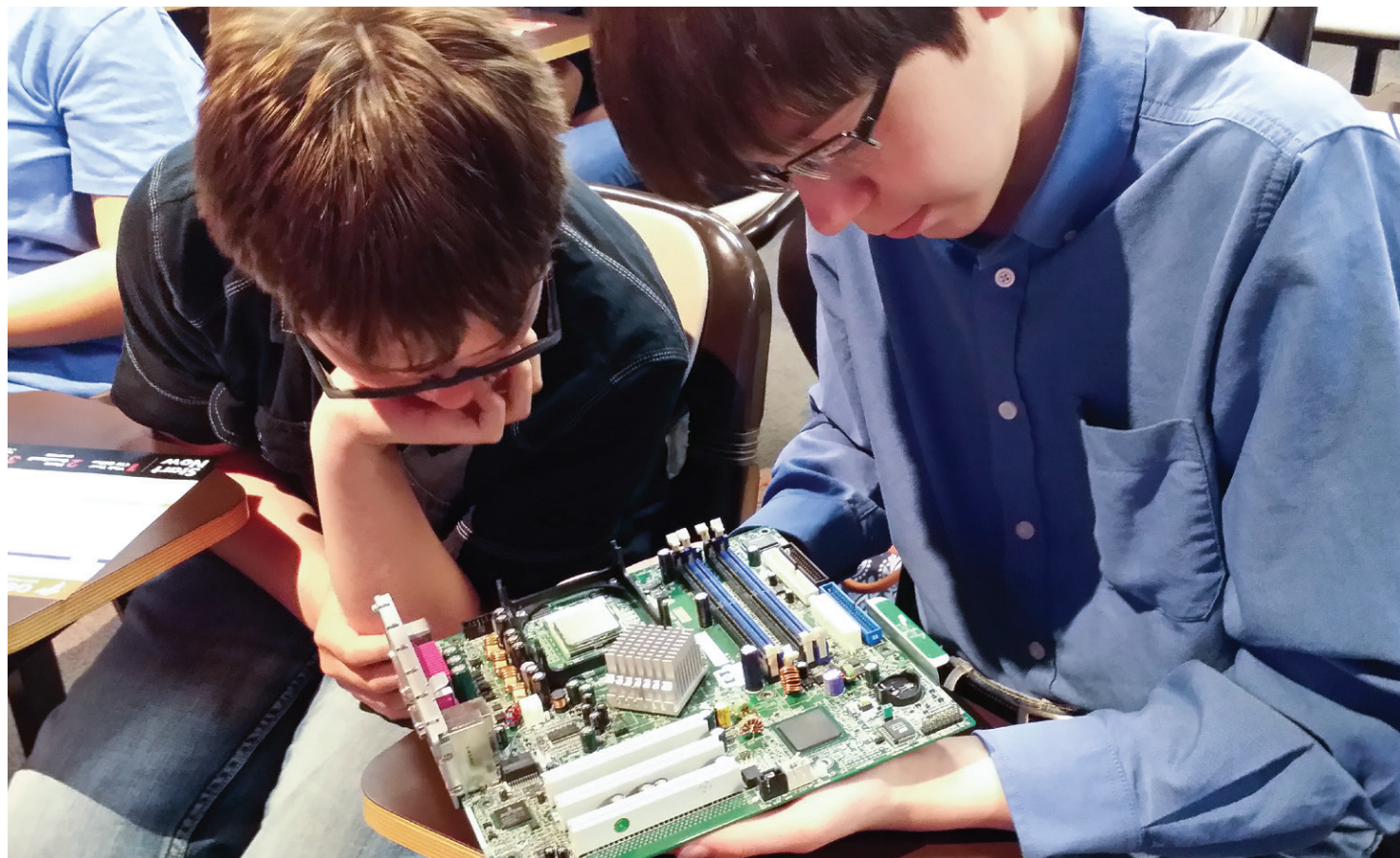
BY KACEE WEAVER

In suburban northern Utah we have little inherent cultural or racial diversity and yet, in the summer of 2014 as I attended the first Montessori For Social Justice Conference at City Garden Montessori in Saint Louis, Missouri, I realized that the opportunities provided to the 26-30% of students in our school with special needs stood in stark contrast to those offered to the majority of the student population. The lack of appropriate representation for this minority unnerved me and I felt the determination to improve the education and lives of our students with diverse learning needs. Over the last three years, we have made great progress in including our special needs children as fully as possible in our “mainstream” Montessori curriculum.

Twenty-six percent of Maria Montessori Academy’s 655 students, Kindergarten through ninth grade, are classified as Students with Disabilities. Of these 141 students, all but four are spending all of their time in the general education environment. If you were to tour Maria Montessori Academy you would see students working individually or in small groups in classrooms, hallways, common areas, offices, the staff break-room, the conference room or outdoors. General education teachers or assistants, special education teachers or assistants, parents, and sometimes administrators or office aides lead these small groups.

In Montessori environment, all children are already on their own informal IEP

The entire school is seen as a learning environment and every effort is taken to prepare these spaces. At Maria Montessori Academy, special education is treated as a service, not a place. In the elementary there are four special education teachers that are assigned to six



Hands-on learning at Maria Montessori Academy

teachers each. Each has a special education caseload of about 30 students. They are responsible for writing the IEPs and collecting data on “their” students according to the students’ IEP goals. Caseload managers meet weekly with the general education teacher to discuss and review the students on their caseload. They assure that a qualified person meets the additional instructional minutes outlined in the student’s IEP, whether it is the general education teacher or teaching assistant, special education assistant or themselves. In a Montessori environment, this is not too difficult to do, since all children are already on their own informal IEP. Additionally, when IEPs are written, we take into account the specialized instruction that the Montessori materials provide.

A Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) program is in place for teachers that determine students are not successful with the “Tier 1” instruction. When a teacher has determined that the student is not making adequate or expected progress they meet with the Student

Intervention Team (SIT) and discuss additional interventions and data collection to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. The teacher then implements the “Tier 2” interventions in the classroom. This can be through an additional reading/math group or an alternate material (returning to golden beads or using pictorial representations instead of concrete materials). The intervention is given four to six weeks, and then data is brought back to the SIT. If progress is made, the student stays on a watch list. If progress is not made, the student is moved to a “Tier 3” intervention.

Tier 3 intervention groups are smaller and specifically targeted to build the lacking skill. Our Interventionist and her team of two work with individually with students or place them in a group with a special education teacher or assistant that has students with similar needs. Data is collected and evaluated after another four to six weeks a third meeting with the SIT will shed light on whether the intense intervention is working and should be continued or if there is a possibility of a learning disability and Special Education testing is needed.

Testing a student for special education gives the adults that advocate with the child an inside look at the specific learning needs. When a student qualifies

through the discrepancy model (a mismatch in abilities vs. progress) we are able to set specific goals and meet them, with the strengths a student has. A child who tests with low math calculation and low processing speed may need to use a calculator or a number chart as an accommodation for things such as operations with unlike denominators. A student who tests with an intellectual disability may need an alternate curriculum and basic functional skills like telling time, counting money and read-aloud technology. This isn’t to say that we don’t continue to follow the student’s desire to count objects or read about dinosaurs, but we also include multiple opportunities to build the lacking skills and IEP goals through their interests.

Students with severe cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, emotional disturbance, autism, speech delays, specific learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities participate fully in the programs as their same-aged peers. Two students have an ABA aide (one-on-one therapist trained in the principles of applied behavior analysis) provided by their personal insurance companies. Three students are new to Maria Montessori Academy as lower elementary students and they spend their morning work cycle in the Learning Lab to learn the transitional skills they need

to be productive in the lower elementary classrooms. They practice choosing work, sitting at line, getting snack and more, in a typical (although smaller) classroom environment with a trained Montessori teacher. They participate in afternoon cultural lessons, recess, lunch and specials with their peers with little or no additional adult services.

However, not all students are as successful. We were recently advised to install a seclusion room (also known as a time-out box) for one of our significant-

of other options to support this student's growth and development, including picture charts, sign language, family communication and more. Each day is a new day to adapt the environment and grow our skills as Montessori guides.

Becoming an inclusive school has not come easily and we still have a long way to go to reach our ideals. Our staff has participated in several book studies over the last three years: *Relationship Driven Classroom Management* by John, M. Vitto, *Creating an Inclusive School* by Richard

shared vision we have experienced conflicting paradigms, tested faith and staff turnover.

We hired a new special education coordinator and increased our special education teaching and assisting staff. We've brought on an Interventionist and an Instructional Coach. We partner with the Institute for Montessori Innovation at Westminster College in Salt Lake City and through a grant from the Sorensen Foundation received consultation from a Special Education Consultant. We provide ongoing training for both the special education teachers and assistants in Montessori pedagogy and the Montessori teachers in special education teaching strategies. We prioritize collaboration time, funding for training, and increased salaries for those that work with our most challenging students. We've improved parent education through our weekly newsletter, Facebook presence and teacher blogs. Our community believes in inclusion and supports the research that indicates that typically developing students receive as many or more benefits as their special

education peers when in an inclusive environment.

It has been suggested that we not to use the term Fully Inclusive to describe our school lest someone take that to mean that we are unable or unwilling to provide a full continuum of services under the requirements of IDEA. Nevertheless, the spaces we offer are not outweighed or outnumbered by the qualified staff we provide to support all our students. We believe in full inclusion of all students in the general education environment to the fullest extent possible and our programs are crafted to meet the needs of all students through the prepared environment.

Kacee Weaver is the Assistant Director of Maria Montessori Academy. She holds a dual B.A. in Early Childhood and Elementary Education, a M. Ed. in Montessori Education from St. Catherine's University and a lower elementary MEPI certification.

Becoming an inclusive school has not come easily, and we still have a long way to go to reach our ideals

ly challenged students. This non-verbal student with Down syndrome becomes agitated and communicates by stripping his clothing and throwing his own excrement. The seclusion method significantly challenges our Montessori ideology, so we are currently trying a number

A. Villa and Jacqueline S. Thousand and Donna Bryant Goertz's *Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful: Preventing Exclusion in the Early Elementary Classroom*, which has helped formulate a vision and expectation for the inclusion of our students with disabilities. Even with this



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ELL in public Montessori: A case study

What can Public Montessori offer to English Language Learners?



BY GRETCHEN SHAHEEN

I have taught in a variety of school settings, including traditional district public schools, public charter schools, and private schools. My experiences in the classroom, both as a teacher and later, as a graduate student, helped to shape my educational philosophy. While I believe that a structured and orderly environment promotes students' academic and behavioral progress, children learn best when allowed more personal freedoms and given greater academic autonomy. My personal views on teaching and learning inspired my recent thesis research in which I examined the benefits of a Montessori education for English Language Learners (ELLs).

During the planning stage of my study, I researched different types of progressive education, paying particular attention to New York area schools available to students of immigrant families, regardless of socioeconomic status. During my search, I came across Montessori, which I believed at the time to be accessible mainly to children of privileged, wealthy families. Upon digging deeper, I learned that Dr. Montessori had originally developed her pedagogical approach to specifically address the needs of underprivileged children in an impoverished area of Rome. Moreover, after encountering the National

Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, I learned that there are approximately 500 public Montessori programs in the United States. Yet New York City, perhaps surprisingly, has only one public Montessori school, the New York City Montessori Charter School (NYCMCS) located in the South Bronx, one of the city's poorest-performing school districts. After getting approval from NYCMCS Principal Abeku Hayes and my school's Institutional Review Board, I eagerly began my research to learn what, if any, benefits a Montessori education may provide for some of New York City's most vulnerable students—immigrant ELLs.

My first visit to NYCMCS was my first time ever setting foot in a Montessori school. I spoke with Principal Hayes and learned that he also had first encountered Montessori after working in traditional schools. After discussing our educational philosophies and the Montessori approach, Principal Hayes gave me a tour of the school. Adorned with plants, select works of art, attractive Montessori materials, and students' creations, the understated classrooms at NYCMCS exude tranquility. However, seeing Montessori in action, more than the physical appearance of the school, left me even more astounded. I particularly remember a visit to a fourth and fifth grade classroom. While a few students worked independently, the majority were spread out in small groups throughout the classroom. Whereas some worked together at tables, others reclined on the floor. The classroom buzzed happily along with conversations about the various learning objectives at hand. I saw many groups using Montessori learning materials, and at certain points, I noticed students tending to a

variety of plants and pets (a rabbit, a gerbil, and a bearded dragon) within the classroom.

After that first remarkable visit, I continued my observations for four months and interviewed several faculty members. Upon completion of my field research, I had a much better understanding of the Montessori approach and identified three of its key components as implemented by NYCMCS which may provide benefits to ELLs: individualized education through differentiation; collaboration among students, which fosters student conversation and language skills; and the application of hands-on Montessori materials, bringing many

resulting in more student-talk and less teacher-talk. Sara Suchman, Director of Coaching and School Services at NC-MPS, explained that beginner ELLs usually go through a "silent period," a phase in which they do not orally communicate in the new language, which is an accepted way of learning in a Montessori classroom. Indeed, during my observations, I saw a student move from a "silent period," which was respected by the faculty, to a phase in which he began to produce short sentences.

During my weekly observations, I frequently witnessed the use of Montessori materials. In fact, it is hard to imagine a lesson in the Montessori classroom

Seeing Montessori in action left me even more astounded

lessons to life for emergent bilinguals.

Like many Montessori schools, each classroom at NYCMCS boasts two teachers to provide more attention to each learner. Frequently, I observed the lead teacher delivering a lesson to a small group of students while the assistant teacher circulated throughout the room, offering help to individual students and small, cooperative groups. In addition, every Monday morning, students completed a "Weekly Work Plan." Just as Dr. Montessori advocated for a freedom within limits for children, NYCMCS students choose from a variety of activities and projects appropriate to their developmental level to complete for the week. Differentiation is an inherent part of the Montessori approach; thus, ELLs are constantly engaged in relevant, self-selected tasks.

Greater student autonomy in conjunction with multi-age classrooms in Montessori schools naturally stimulates student discussions on a daily basis, which is especially important for language learners. On multiple occasions in the regular education classrooms at NYCMCS, I witnessed older students assisting younger students with the Montessori materials as well as other routine tasks. While it seems simple, flexible seating and the freedom of movement in a Montessori classroom effortlessly initiates cooperation among students. In addition, each focused lesson of the ELL classroom that I observed encouraged collaboration among students,

that doesn't rely upon manipulatives of some sort. For instance, I observed students using an assortment of math materials, such as a checkerboard cloth, number tiles, and math beads to learn about place value, multiplication, and division. Students also enjoyed using several different types of language arts and social studies cards. In many cases, ELLs worked with native English-speaking peers to complete an activity using these manipulatives.

Overall, while the academic approach and humanistic disciplinary methods implemented by NYCMCS may provide an advantage to ELLs, operating a school that is at once public and Montessori is, of course, challenging. As a public Montessori school, NYCMCS faces issues that other Montessori schools do not. Funding and high-stakes state testing continue to concern administrators and faculty alike. Nevertheless, this research study left me with a great appreciation for the project of public Montessori schools. Each day, NYCMCS offers students an education that respects them as individuals, values their autonomy, and strives to meet their needs in a personalized way.

Gretchen Shaheen holds an M.A. in Latin American Studies from New York University. A certified teacher, she has taught a variety of subjects in grades K-6, and currently serves as a Primary Literacy Promoter in the Peace Corps Dominican Republic.

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Special needs parents have needs of their own

Parents need to know what Montessori offers for their children



BY GENA ENGELFRIED

Children must grow, not only in the body but in the spirit, and the mother longs to follow the mysterious spiritual journey of the beloved one who, tomorrow, will be the intelligent divine creature, man.

—Maria Montessori

Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook

Special needs students bring a lot of value to our school. Their uniqueness is well served by our method and it is good for all of our learners to be exposed to diversity. As public schools we know that

in this issue) to IEP (Individualized Education Plan) is a journey that requires patience and commitment on everyone's part. Communication is the key and teachers come to understand that letting parents know when things are not going quite right can pave the way to more difficult discussions about identifying what a child's additional needs really are. These are key discussions and need to be encouraged in the context of parent-teacher conferences, where our tendency is to highlight only positive aspects of a child's development. As this journey toward identifying and addressing a child's needs ensues, the key words are clarity, honesty and compassion.

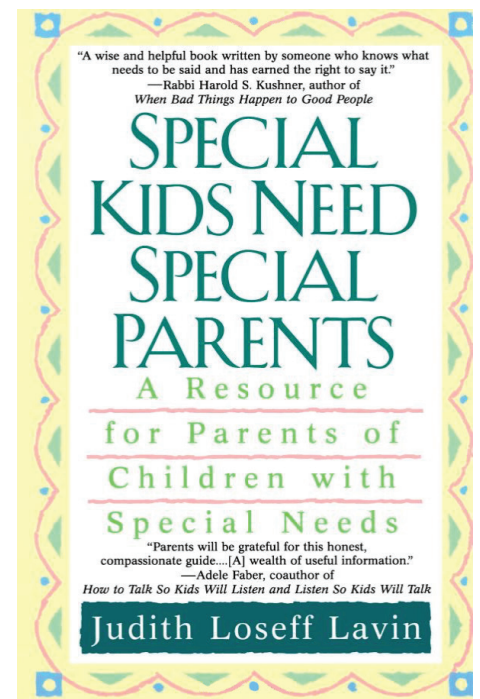
There are also parents who seek out a Montessori environment knowing that their child has a special need—and these needs can often be quite profound. Montessori's early career and her success with children who were deemed “unteachable” has been discussed widely. Today, these students, whether their

are outside the boundaries of authentic Montessori.

What support do these learners and their families need, and how can we prepare environments where the children can be successful? The number one thing these children need are knowledgeable parents who are calm and informed, and who believe that the child's teachers, as well as school administration and staff, understand and honor the child and their unique way of approaching the world. The children also need extra specially prepared environments (possibly including, for example, sensory materials and sandpaper letters in a lower elementary classroom), individualized lessons, and a teacher or guide who is qualified and able to help them find their unique strengths and interests. These are investments worth making.

Parents who have recently received a diagnosis for their child or who are in the process of an evaluation will benefit from the gentle reminder that this change of understanding is going to take some getting used to. In her book for special needs parents, *Special Needs Parents: A Resource for Parents of Children with Special Needs*, Judith Loseff Lavin describes the process that some parents go through when coming to terms with the fact that their child has a learning difference. Loseff reminds readers that the news that one's child is not a typical learner can be devastating to many parents. She reminds us that parents who get this news may need to go through the stages of grief that accompany any great loss.

As public Montessorians, it is easy to get caught up in the initiatives, safety concerns, curriculum management is-



responsibility. It is also worth the time spent. If parents can connect, trust and come to accept their child's uniqueness, then they, and we as educators, can form cohesive teams to find the best ways to meet their needs.

Not every special needs child is like Jamie Oliver, Temple Grandin, Kiera Knightly or John Nash, but all of these contributors to society were once special needs students. We have a duty and an obligation to help each child reach their full potential, and we can begin by helping each parent know that their child is unique and wonderful.

Working together as a team, the adults in a child's life can prepare an environment of support, challenge, love and guidance that will help the child grow in confidence. As a child with a special need learns new ways to compensate, create, and be successful, he or she will be able to reach their potential and use the gifts that they have. Talent, skill and self-efficacy can grow in an atmosphere of support and self-reliance. Helping parents to see that their child, like all of the other children, are on a road to independence, and encouraging them to believe that they will get there, is the answer.

Gena Engelfried is the Head of School at Golden Oak Montessori (a public charter school in Hayward, California). She has been a Montessori primary and adolescent guide, consultant, speaker, and international educator in Indonesia, Kazakhstan, and Australia.

These children need parents who believe that the teachers, administration, and staff understand and honor the child

if our institutions are going to grow and thrive, we need to serve students with special needs. The atypical learner usually makes up at least 10% of any school. In public district, magnet, or charter schools, this percentage is almost invariably higher.

If we are to serve these children, we must serve their parents as well. But parents of children who learn differently often themselves require a bit more attention and understanding than what we, as Montessori teachers and leaders, typically expect.

We tend to attract two types of parents of special needs students. The first type is unaware of the full extent of their child's needs, but may be beginning to suspect that they have an atypical learner. These parents are usually attracted to the presence of an assistant in the classroom, Montessori's “hands-on” approach, or the positive, loving, and caring environments that characterize our schools. Identifying a child's need, from Child Study (as developed by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, and described elsewhere

disability has been identified and labeled or not, can do well in our schools as long as parents understand that our goal is to move children and adolescents toward independence and intrinsic motivation. Making this clear, from day one, is very important. If a parent's goal is purely academic progress, Montessori may not be the right environ-

If parents can trust and come to accept their child's uniqueness, we can form cohesive teams to meet their needs

ment for their special needs child, especially if they are seeking a school that offers a token economy, star charts and praise as motivators. As public schools, we are often required to accept all students who seek enrollment, and this is a noble thing. But as public Montessori schools, we need to stand out ground and be willing to draw the line when a parent requests accommodations that

sues and administrative duties that pull and tug from every side of the school. Taking the time to sit and help parents of special needs students to choose Montessori wisely (aware of our lack of motivational praise and our focus on independence) is essential. Helping the parents of newly diagnosed children process the news that a child has a disability is an honor and a huge

Cultivating an attitude of inclusion

Montessori is inclusionary by design



BY CHRISTINE LOWRY

“It seems like more and more of my students are having trouble settling in.” “I’ve tried everything but she just can’t follow directions.” “We’ve worked and worked but he isn’t remembering his sounds.” “Kids seem different these days—I just don’t know what to do.”

The facts

Sound familiar? Montessori teachers in all settings, public and independent, are expressing concerns about the

Statistical Manual used by psychologists added difficulties with sensory processing as a criterion for making an ASD diagnosis).

- 60% of children identified as exhibiting Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder were found to have sensory processing disorders.

Although we don’t have current statistics, it has long been accepted that Specific Learning Disabilities are a result of some sort of processing disorder. Speech and language disorders are on the rise and often have a sensory processing difficulty component.

The myths

“I can’t work with children with special needs. I don’t have a special education degree or training.”

“If I have to focus all of my time on this one student, I won’t have time for the other 26 in my class.”

“Kids seem different these days—I just don’t know what to do.”

numbers of students whose behavior is a challenge to manage, who seem unmotivated and easily distracted, and who aren’t learning in the way we have come to expect of “Montessori children.”

What we do know is that the incidence of students with identified “special needs” is increasing. The Center for Disease Control (CDC), using data from 2012, estimated that 1 in 68 children have been identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2014-15) states that 13% of school age children have been identified with special needs, including specific learning disabilities, autism, developmental delays, and mental health issues. However, a more recent figure of 15-20% is more commonly stated. Data from 2011-12 estimates that 11% of children age 4-17 have been labeled ADHD.

Any number of researchers have hypothesized reasons for these increases, but the Star Institute for Sensory Processing Disorder has shared data that could indicate a commonality across identified needs and labels

- 90% of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder have sensory processing disorders. (In fact, the most recent Diagnostic and

“If we can get the child diagnosed we will have a label that will tell us what to do.”

Our roots

Our hesitancy about our ability to support students with challenges is understandable. But the good news is that the Montessori system of education has a number of “built-ins” for addressing individual needs. With some knowledge and understanding there is much we have of offer to support all students. By creating an “inclusive classroom” we can accept, respect, and benefit all of our children.

A child is not a label, and a label only gives us the broadest of contexts for understanding behavior and learning challenges. The scope of this article is not the characteristics and definitions of a given diagnosis. “Special education” really is based on observation, individualized supports, understanding of some tools and techniques for support, and guiding a child to more positive behavior and learning. There is no set “program” that works for all children with a shared diagnosis.

Creating an inclusion classroom environment

Inclusion is the creation of a classroom community conducive to helping all students meet academic and behavioral goals. It is understood that:

- Healthy social development is a primary emphasis in early childhood (birth to age eight).
- All children learn in different ways at different rates.
- It’s every child’s right to be included.

An inclusive classroom benefits all with opportunities to develop acceptance, respect, and compassion.

What is good for one is good for all

As Montessori educators, we know the foundational importance of a properly prepared environment. Our goal is to prepare the optimal physical, temporal, and social-emotional environment that will enable all of our students to thrive. Our training in observation, not just record keeping of lessons presented, but truly seeing with the eye of the scientist, as Dr. Montessori tells us, will give us the information we need. Our knowledge of child development and ability to determine typical and atypical growth in each domain, the character-

- Minimal sensory stimulation with thoughtful decoration that enhances rather than overwhelms.
- Optimal temperature and natural lighting.

The Social-Emotional Environment

- Predictable routines, structure, schedule with well-planned transitions.
- Positive, warm, accepting adult-child interactions.
- Social skills teaching with opportunities for practice, role-playing, cuing, prompting, and encouragement.
- Opportunities for “social cohesion” such as class meetings, mutual encouragement, guided problem and conflict solving, work toward a common goal (Silence Game, Walking the Line, Goings-Out).
- Time to engage, experiment, and work at one’s own pace.

This knowledge, our attitude and optimal preparation is the first step in creating an inclusive classroom. All children, regardless of needs or challenges, want to belong, want to be a valued member of their community, want to succeed, and get along with others. There are individual supports, the tools

Our philosophy grounds us in an attitude of acceptance and respect

istics and needs of the children in each Plane of Development, and our ability to recognize Sensitive periods guides our ability to individualize for each student. Our philosophy grounds us in an attitude of acceptance, and respect for each child giving us the tools to model grace and courtesy, and positive ways to interact for our students and create a true community of “social cohesion.”

What Is Optimal for All Students?

The Physical Environment

- Well organized, ordered, and beautiful activities that are developmentally appropriate and of interest to the students.
- Furniture and activity area arrangement that supports movement and work patterns.

and techniques, for working with children with challenges of behavior and learning that we can learn to use (and these can be explored in further articles) but fundamentally each of our students is a unique individual, with strengths and challenges. As Montessori educators we have the advantage and the support of an amazing system for understanding, teaching, and supporting each of our special children.

Christine Lowry, founder, administrator, and lead teacher at two Montessori schools with the mission of serving all kinds of learners, holds an M. Ed. in special education from UNC-CH and an early childhood Montessori credential. She provides consultations for schools to develop and support their plans for their classrooms and individual students. She can be reached at christine@montessori-now.com

The case for push-in services

NCMPS White Paper supports push-in services for ELL and SPED

BY NCMPS STAFF

The following article is adapted from the NCMPS White Paper “English Language Learners and Special Education Students in Montessori Schools: The Case for Push-In Services”, available as a PDF (with full references) at public-montessori.org/smarter-tools/#resources. Other NCMPS White Papers are available on the same page.

Montessori classrooms support a push-in model

Both education research and federal mandates point toward the desirability of well-implemented inclusion programs for English language learners (ELLs) and special education students (SPED). Within an inclusion model, bringing interventionists to the general education classroom, rather than separating students for support services, is increasingly viewed as an optimal model for supporting students with special educational and additional language needs. The logic of the Montessori method uniquely situates its classrooms both to support and benefit from a push-in model of special education and English Language Learner instruction.

- **Individual and small group lessons**—The entire Montessori classroom is set up around one-on-one and small group work. When an interventionist comes in and offers such lessons, it fits well within the norm of the classroom and in no way disrupts or stands out from the usual flow of the classroom.
- **Uninterrupted three-hour work period**—Montessori classrooms are structured around a three-hour work period during which students move freely between work areas and materials. This structure allows the interventionist to work with students at a mutually agreeable time, minimizing interruptions, supporting student choice and thereby enhancing learning.
- **Materials that move from the concrete to abstract**—Montessori materials begin with concrete representations and then move to abstract for all students. These same materials are easily accessible to ELL and special education students and can be used by push-in teachers to reinforce regular lessons.

Benefits of push-in for Montessori

At the same time, the impact of the Montessori model is strengthened through a push-in program and, in turn, weakened when students are

individual needs as a normal part of classroom life.

- Push-in services in the general classroom support peer engagement and friendships and reduce social stigma.
- **Respect for workflow:** During independent work time, skilled interventionists invite students to lessons as they are ready, rather than interrupting concentrated work or lessons from the classroom teacher.
- Respecting a student’s workflow by minimizing interruptions supports student concentration, self-direction and motivation and is a crucial component of a strong Montessori experience.
- Push-in services allow ELL and special education students to reap these essential benefits of the program.

Reduction of transitions: Montessori pedagogy minimizes stressors such as transitions in order to allow students to focus their full energy on learning. Push-in services create this environment for all students.

- Consistent expectations: In a push-in model, interventionists can observe and follow the classroom teacher’s way of interacting with students.
- Consistent setting: Students learn in an environment with which they are already familiar and comfortable.

Increased independence: As students learn from interventionists how to navigate the environment independently, they increase their success and sense of self-efficacy within the Montessori classroom.

Limitations of the push-in model

Under some circumstances, attention to the needs of the child dictates that working with the child in a resource room or other quiet space away from the classroom is preferable to push-in support. Some Montessori communities label this as “step-out” support, as it is flexible and can be initiated by the child as well as by the interventionist.

Circumstances in which step-out support might be preferable include:

- Speech and language services in which pronunciation and articulation are key to student learning.
- A highly distracted child who benefits from having a first lesson in a separate environment before working on the material in the classroom.

- A child with emotional disturbances who needs a quiet place to regain his or her composure before returning to work in the classroom.

Even when a school primarily uses the recommended push-in approach, the availability of a resource room can help meet these specific needs.

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The logic of Montessori both supports and benefit from a push-in model of special education and ELL instruction

“Push-in” refers to the practice of delivering ELL or special education services inside the regular classroom rather than “pulling out” identified students for services in a separate setting. Montessori programs are ideally suited for supporting this service model. Montessori classrooms delivering high fidelity implementation offer:

- **Mixed age groups and fully differentiated instruction**—A full array of materials is available within each multi-grade classroom. Instruction is differentiated for all students, making the differentiation for ELL and SPED an easily incorporated and natural part of the classroom.

pulled out of the classroom for services. Push-in services allow ELL and special education students to receive the services they need while reaping the same benefits of the Montessori program as their classmates.

Social integration: Push-in services within the Montessori classrooms benefit the social development of all students in the classroom, not just those with special needs:

- Exceptional students can be supported to work in small groups with typically developing students and native English speakers.
- All students learn from each other and learn to see differences and



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Hawthorne: My journey teaching ESL in Montessori

continued from page 1

beyond the classroom. CRP challenged me to gain a deeper understanding of each learner and their family by building sustainable relationships. One way was to acknowledge the experiences of the oppressed groups through a more truthful curriculum. Another was to realize that these are not homogeneous groups, but rather that infinite diversity exists and intersects. Once I started to recognize my world, I could recognize others' worlds, which lead me to cultivating more inclusive relationships.

Writer and teacher Clint Smith says, "We so often operate under the false pretense that our classrooms are these somehow sanctuaries that are not affected by the rest of the world, but our students leave our classrooms and go out into a world in which they are deeply affected by the sociopolitical phenomena that they experience every day." Smith goes on to offer how educators of culturally responsive pedagogy create space for our learners to develop their own sense of critical consciousness and engagement with the world. I did this by providing access to a more truthful curriculum and holding courageous conversations during community meeting.

Author and scholar Dr. Sonia Nieto, a leading thinker in the areas of diversity, equity, and social justice in education, gives some examples of what teachers can do to foster a more inclusive environment with individual learners beyond the visual culture.



See him as an individual, not a category

Culturally responsive pedagogy goes beyond the visual culture of multiculturalism

- Learn to say students' names correctly. For example, Jorge should not be called George. Don't be afraid to ask the child to pronounce their name more than once. It shows you value them and their cultural identity.
- Label the room with the languages spoken by your ELLs
- Do a home visit to learn as much as you can about your student's family, cultural history and language. If you can't meet at their home, pick a convenient spot: Starbucks, the laundromat, or a community center.

flection, affirming languages and cultures in the classroom every day, having high expectations for all learners and honoring families.

Here is a short list of resources and people I'm following to prepare my spirit and my environment to meet the needs of all of my learners.

Resources

- *The Lines We Cross*, by a Muslim-Australian woman, Rabda Abdel-Fatta—A great addition to an adolescent classroom introducing

different perspectives on immigration and asylum.

- *Yes! We Are Latinos: Poems and Prose about the Latino Experience*, by Alma Flor Ada—Free verse poems representing the diversity within Spanish speaking communities for the Elementary classroom.
- *Rethinking Bilingual Education: Welcoming Home Languages in Our Classrooms* by Elizabeth Barbian—A collection of classroom stories about teachers welcoming home languages and families in the classroom. The social justice principles for a bilingual program are a must discussion for every school.
- *Between Two Worlds: Asian Heritage* and *Between Two Worlds: Hispanic Heritage*: www.colorincolorado.org—My favorite website for bilingual, research-based information, activities, and advice for educators and families of ELLs.
- *CAN DO Descriptors Original Edition* from wida.us/standards/CAN_DOs/#sld—Examples of language performance within each domain.
- *De Colores: The Raza Experience in Books for Children* from decoloresreviews.blogspot.com—A blog that reviews children's books about Latinx experiences through a critical, social justice lens.
- "Know Your Rights and What Immigrant Families Should Do Now." from the *Immigrant Legal Resource Center*, ilrc.org/know-your-rights-and-what-immigrant-families-should-do-now—Helps educators

can support immigrant families. We sent similar documents from the ACLU home to all of our students after the 2016 presidential election.

- *Doing Culturally Responsive Education: What Does It Take?*, by Sonia Nieto—This lecture provides an overview to culturally responsive pedagogy and gives practical strategies to becoming a culturally responsive teacher. Dr. Nieto's profoundly multicultural questions sparked deep contemplation about my teaching practice.
- *Toolkit for 'Immigrant and Refugee Children: A Guide for Educators and School Support Staff'* from www.tolerance.org—A guide for educators to learn the facts about immigrant students, resources for their families and lessons for your classroom.

People and organizations to follow

- *Anti-biasMontessori.com*—Tiffany Jewell
- *KnowThyself Montessori Materials*—Koren Clark
- *Embracing Equity*—Christine Daisy Han
- *Montessori for Social Justice*
- *Crossroads Antiracism Organizing & Training* (2018 AMS Annual Conference)

Britt Hawthorne, Directress of Learner's Schoolhouse in Houston, Texas and educational guide at Listening and Learning. You can reach her at britt@listeningandlearning.org

Dubovoy: Is Montessori for every child in 2018?

continued from page 1

myself through independent reading, various courses, and eventually getting a doctorate. I am a practitioner who has had experiences not only with children with atypical behaviors but also with bilingual education. I know that it is possible to succeed at a task if you really want to do it, even in the face of tremendous challenge. I have been fortunate to have learned from and worked with Dr. Carl R. Rogers, Dr. John Osterkorn, and many other extraordinary people in my life. All this prepared me for the work I do now with Inclusive Education.

I started developing the Inclusive Education Course for AMI more than a decade ago and opened the first course in the 2014 at The Montessori Institute of San Diego. At the time, I envisioned it as continuing education for seasoned

Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing our Kids for the Innovation Era:

“Years from now, historians will point to this period as an inflection point for the United States. They’ll write about how the core structure of the global economy changed in the blink of an eye. The creative force of innovation erased millions and millions of routine jobs and eroded the power of large, bureaucratic organizations. As those economic dinosaurs died off, they were replaced by countless opportunities for the innovative, for the creative, for the nimble.”

It is not yet a common belief that children with learning disorders bring an advantageous skillset that may enable them to thrive in the unknown world of tomorrow better than their mainstream

child with exceptionality and the parents. If those incredible, self-sacrificing teachers are now facing challenging situations beyond their resources, we cannot blame them if they start losing faith in their skills or begin to doubt whether they can make a difference in the life of a child.

Which approach: Montessori, mainstream, or hybrid?

As our practice expands to meet the needs of more children with challenges, especially in the public sector, Montessori is facing tough questions: Should we embrace diagnosis and assessment, at the risk of labeling and pigeon-holing the child? Should we follow traditional methods to work with children with atypical behavior (for example, removing them from the classroom to work with specialists), or can we support them in the Montessori classroom? Should we offer the support of a “shadow” for certain children—a specially-trained adult who follows them throughout their day in the regular classroom? Is it fair for the other children that we spend so much time with one child? What additional resources of time and energy should we anticipate investing in order to build strong relationships with parents of atypical children?

Diagnosis & assessment

For years, we in the Montessori world have rejected the concept of having children assessed and labeled with a diagnosis. However, assessment combined with intelligent and informed scientific observation can help the teacher to de-

that diagnosis is important, at the very least so the child can receive benefits from the public school system. Diagnosing a child can confirm for the parents why he is acting in a certain manner, and although having a diagnosis may be initially unsettling, knowing is better than not knowing in the long run.

Record-keeping With diagnosis and assessment comes the responsibility for keeping meticulous records, beginning with a physical assessment of each child that includes, for example, hearing and vision tests. Of course, these senses should be monitored informally by parents from the very beginning, as important milestones depend on their proper functioning during the first three years of life. It is also necessary to keep a record of past challenging situations and strengths. However, this information should be used as just a reference, considered along with other firsthand observations, always making an effort to avoid labeling the child. Children, like all humans, deserve to be seen with fresh eyes every day.

Outside therapy and “shadows”

It is not recommended to take a child out of class for therapy with a specialist or for disciplinary actions during the morning work. The Montessori classroom itself, properly prepared and implemented, is a therapeutic environment. And, the child’s personality may be affected and his sense of value diminished: “Something is wrong with me,” he may think to himself. We cannot mea-

Nature makes differences and society makes handicaps

Montessori teachers, intended to support schools by developing Montessori-compatible techniques and approaches to help children with conditions such as dyslexia, autism, ADHD, bipolar disorder and Down syndrome. Since then, the Inclusive Education Course has become a profound meeting of the minds that attracts incredible, dedicated Montessori educators from around the world.

In my work, I often say that “nature makes differences and society makes handicaps.” I envision a future in which society will focus on the variations in skills and abilities that children naturally exhibit, not as a concern but simply as a different way to approach life. A narrow educational system cannot be expected to work for every person. Reading, writing and mathematics are crucial at this moment in history in order to navigate life, but we will also need creative minds in the future with other skills such as those observed, for example, in children with autism—diverse competencies to cope with a future that we do not yet know. This thrilling moment in time, as we stand on the precipice of a burgeoning new humanity composed of increasingly diverse expressions of the human experience, is captured eloquently in Ted Dintersmith and Tony Wagner’s book,

peers. But Montessori teachers are fortunate to have an approach that naturally supports this concept.

Today’s challenge—Montessori in the digital era

In Montessori, we study the connection between mind and body and believe that the child creates himself through his direct experiences in the environment. A Montessori teacher must have an open, caring attitude, use observation as her best tool, and encourage concentration through meaningful, purposeful work. As AMI trainer Margaret Stephenson said many times in her lectures on Human Tendencies: “The child of the caves is the same child as the child of today”. So why is it that, during our own teaching lifetimes, we are finding it harder to follow the child of today, who comes to the classroom showing characteristics difficult to understand and guide? We ask ourselves all kinds of questions, as we see what seems like an ever-widening spectrum of different behaviors: Is it the genes? Is it the environment? Is it an emotional disorder? There are so many unknowns.

For me, those who choose to be teachers are heroes: Their jobs require not just knowledge, but patience, empathy, resilience and much compassion for both the

Many aspects of the Montessori approach inherently support children with exceptionalities

vises the appropriate intervention. Often, wrong decisions are taken when a teacher feels that she has tried everything and has run out of ideas. A diagnosis can be that vital impetus that enables the teacher to see the child from a new perspective, and to consider novel approaches that may not occur to her when working with typical children. Each child is a unique person and whatever condition he has is also uniquely manifested within him. Nevertheless, early intervention is crucial. I have come to the conclusion

sure the effect in the personality of this child when it happens. Certainly, and especially in the elementary, because children need to be prepared to work in the classroom at a certain level, additional lessons in writing, reading and mathematics may be needed if they cannot progress at a reasonable rate under normal conditions. But this can often be provided in the afternoon, after class.

What about a shadow or one-on-one aide, if a diagnosis supports the recommendation and funding is provided?

There are still many variables to consider. Ideally such a person should:

- have expertise with the relevant diagnosis or condition
- be trained on how to conduct himself in the classroom, as including another adult modifies the dynamic
- understand the concepts of freedom, limits and independence as well as acceptable ways to redirect a child's behavior
- not interfere in the work of children, and be aware of all other rules established in that classroom
- take daily records and report to the teacher.
- represent a transitory situation until the child can adapt to his environment

Can all children thrive in Montessori?

In general, Montessori schools are an absolute haven for children with exceptionalities, an excellent option because of a number of factors:

- Montessori teachers follow the development of every child without distinction.
- Montessori environments support respect, cooperation and development of social cohesion instead of competition.
- Multi-age classrooms allow children to learn from each other and ideally keep the same teacher for three years.
- Children are minimally subjected to tests or grades, and can learn at their own pace with a material of their choice
- Perhaps most of all, the hands-on developmental materials support authentic, self-paced learning.

Many aspects of the Montessori approach inherently support children with exceptionalities. At the primary level, a variety of outdoor activities can accommodate motor delays, and simple yoga poses can respond to the special needs of an exceptional child without isolating them or calling attention. In elementary, we have activities that allow us to quietly spot a child with some weakness so we can strengthen the child's sense of worth and independence through a game or an exercise. We have had children that dramatically changed behavior through the innocuous, even enjoyable, process of following a leader. Other children can improve their ability to self-regulate by being motivated to participate in a game according to the rules. We have also found that any activity that includes nature, water, plants or producing something tends to be a

rewarding experience for the child with exceptionalities.

Then again, just because an environment is "Montessori" does not mean it will work for every child. The teacher must observe the child objectively and record how he is interacting with the environment. What makes him feel calm? What provokes stress? How about noise in the classroom? Distractions? Observation is key, but it is not enough. If the environment is not guided by a certain

the child has an un-diagnosed learning disorder, or if the parents do not readily disclose known issues to the school. In this case, the child may start giving behavioral signals, as he might feel frustrated or bored in the classroom due to his limitations. From there, challenges start growing until the teacher has to face a decision on how to respond, perhaps without the appropriate information or support to respond to the child's true needs.



A lesson on the 100 Chain at the Montessori Institute of San Diego

modicum of classroom management, this child will suffer instead of gain from Montessori. New teachers may be particularly vulnerable as they attempt to serve children with exceptional needs if their classroom management skills are still in the process of maturing.

It is also possible that disabilities may not become immediately evident in the Montessori environment. In the primary classroom, the mastery of all subjects is not indispensable, so a child may "fall behind" academically without immediate intervention or consequences. Observation and intervention supporting development are more important at this stage. But the situation becomes more challenging when under-prepared students transition into an elementary classroom where they need to read, write, and use mathematical concepts in order to participate with the other children. Additional problems can arise if

Successful teachers: what really works for all children

In the end, it is not just the environment or the use of the materials that will make a difference in the life of a child: it is the understanding, inherent to Montessori, that each child has within himself the power to succeed if he feels the warm, unconditional acceptance from the teacher combined with the appropriate environment. I truly believe that even in Montessori schools, if you push the children through teaching instead of inspiring them to learn from real experiences, the love of learning disappears. Montessori schools achieve their highest potential when they operate like a true scientific experiment, constantly challenging themselves to review their programs, and to ask with an open mind whether their practices are still genuinely useful. Montessori

writes in *Education and Peace*, "We adults are rigid. We remain in one place. But the child is all motion. He moves hither and thither to raise us far above the earth." This recent spate of children with exceptional abilities is challenging us to move out of our comfort zones and experiment with new approaches. We in the Montessori movement have been breathing the same rarefied air for a long time; a little more circulation will be healthy for everyone.

I have seen beautiful classrooms that absolutely work for children with exceptionalities because the teacher believes that any child can succeed no matter his condition. This teacher follows the child in the truest sense, and may decide to sing that morning to break through stress, or tell a story that will fascinate a child, or to provoke such a happy mood in the class that children are spontaneously singing while they are working. The successful teachers I have seen look deeply into the eyes of a child and can see the spirit behind the disorder; they act upon that personal connection and not the outer manifestations of the disorder. They understand that the child did not choose to be exceptional, so they do not take some of the "misbehaving" or lack of attention personally.

When we enter into a profession of service, we receive more than what we give. Then, from that place of infinite abundance, we can understand one of the seminal concepts explained in Montessori's writing: To teach is to serve the spirit of man without distinctions. Ultimately, it is the attitude of the teacher that has the power to make a child with exceptionalities feel welcomed, loved, and accepted, and to provide an integrated experience of body, mind, and spirit that will allow him to flourish, in his own, utterly unique way, no matter what the future brings.

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Taylor: Special needs in AMI Montessori

continued from page 3

We know that, in a high-fidelity Montessori program, the whole child is nurtured. The multi-aged classroom is a community of people simply living and working together. Without defined grades and grade-level lessons, children don't see themselves, or each other, as "behind", or "ahead", or "smarter", or "in the slow group", because those distinctions aren't made. Children learn that they are at school to work extremely hard doing their own best work each day.

We do not interrupt the three-hour work cycle; we work diligently to inspire deep concentration during that time and guard it religiously. Lessons are designed to appeal to the developmental needs and attributes of the child receiving the lesson. Because each child's learning experience is tailored, struggling children feel like learning is something they can do. Learning feels fun! Children are invigorated by the work they have completed and are inspired to try harder, taking on increasingly greater academic challenges and experiencing their own success. In a presentation that two six-year-old children gave to Cornerstone guests in our second year of operation, one child finished up by saying, "At this school, everybody's smart!"

Children experiencing an authentic Montessori education believe in themselves as capable people and important members of society. Children who believe that about themselves have more capacity to excel academically, whether it means remediating lagging skills or soaring beyond expectations.

With all children, regardless of ability, we need to consider human tendencies, developmental characteristics, prepared adults, and the prepared environment. And, we must consider this work in the context of relationships: with the child, with parents or guardians, and with the specialists and support staff. Montessori's unique strength is this theoretical grounding. A child of privilege with a long Montessori background and a fourth-year child with considerable special needs joining Montessori for the first time have the same human tendencies and predictable developmental needs.

Human tendencies

Living and learning each day in an environment that fosters the use and development of tendencies that are the very essence of being human is ideal.



We work diligently to inspire deep concentration

Spending time in an environment that doesn't foster these tendencies will make the most "normalized", regulated child cranky at least, and numb and passive in their own education at worst. Tragically, the first things to go for a child who is struggling are often the freedoms to move, choose, explore, communicate, and work on something meaningful. Dr. Montessori reminds us of this: "The task of the educator lies in seeing that the child does not confound good with immobility, and evil with activity, as often happens in old-time discipline."

Developmental characteristics

With second plane children, the reasoning mind, a powerful sense of justice, the ability to imagine, a seemingly infinite capacity for big work, a drive to be with peers, and hero worship are characteristics (among others) we all know and experience daily in our work. Even when a child is escalated or dis-regulated—possibly raging in her environment or our office space—we must remember to respond in a way that appeals to these developmental characteristics. Just as we appeal to the child's reasoning mind when we give a presentation, or to her strong sense of right and wrong when setting up a system of justice in the classroom, so too must we help an elementary child who is struggling to reason through a hard situation or to express an injustice appropriately. We must have foremost in our minds all that we know about children, especially

in these hardest moments, and appeal to the child in crisis with a twinkle in our eye and with understanding in our hearts, enticing her along a path of development, just as we do with engaging stories and beautiful presentations. We have a wealth of knowledge and energy for working through the most challenging situations with struggling children when we remain firmly grounded in these ideals.

Children with special needs or escalated or explosive behaviors attending schools with more conventional discipline policies and procedures, possibly essentially marching them through to suspension or expulsion, are not likely to see themselves as people who have something valuable to offer their communities. It is our job to stick with all of our children, our most struggling children especially, all the way through an incident, supporting deeper understanding and skill development so that each time a child has a better chance to be more successful the next time. It is our responsibility to involve them, support them, believe in them, and guide them as they learn increasingly more about self-advocacy, compassion and empathy, and being an important, contributing member of their community.

The prepared environment

Almost all of our specialist work is done by as a "push-in" to the classroom, as opposed to pulling children out. We do have a lovely smaller room where the

specialists can take smaller groups or individual children when that best supports the child's needs. Still, a school environment to serve all children must have prepared spaces beyond the classrooms. At Cornerstone we have several designated places for children to choose when they are feeling escalated and unable to cope in their regular environment, as well as the greenhouse, my office, and a sunny spot in the main hallway. All of these additional spaces are prepared with the same attention to the principles of beauty, simplicity, and order we give our classroom environments. Children who are feeling terrible will feel much less so in a beautiful space; we must never underestimate the importance of lovely space, well-prepared to meet our children's needs.

Relationships

Developing relationships with the children and fostering their strong relationships among each other and with the other adults is the absolute foundation for all of the other hard work we have to do together. The impact of the environment and the relationship to the trained teacher and with peers in the environment cannot be overstated. Community violence, drugs, and institutional poverty destabilize families and children. A sense of belonging and accountability to their friends and community creates an atmosphere that fosters connection and respect. In turn, this enables the child to find greater

peace and engage with materials and activities.

Donna Bryant Goertz's book *Children Who are Not Yet Peaceful* has added a new dimension to our work. Now our teachers are dealing with relationships as a part of the core curriculum. We are in our first year of implementing school-based mental health services precisely to capitalize on these moments, and we are already seeing a profound effect on the entire program. We must not underestimate how rich our environments are for this kind of development. These lessons are even more important (and there are more opportunities for

how intense, wonderful, and transformative that preparation can be—it's the key to our best work. Though we can't fully train every adult in the building, they all deserve a clear picture of how they fit into this tricky work of adding adults and expertise without compromising the child's Montessori experience.

Roles

It is extremely important that everyone understand his or her role—all children and all adults. Often, Montessori teachers and specialists can work side by side, as long as guides are careful not to undermine another adult in front of the

Even when a child is escalated, we respond in a way that appeals to developmental characteristics

them) for children in crisis or struggling with other aspects of development.

Embracing and integrating experts and expertise

Montessori guides are enlightened generalists rather than subject matter experts: we know enough to excite interest, and to guide the work of the children in all subjects. But when a child's thirst for knowledge exceeds what we are able to provide in the classroom, we encourage them to tap the knowledge of an expert, perhaps by going out or inviting someone in. We work with our support staff in our classrooms and schools in the same way. Our staff, including paraprofessionals, highly specialized licensed special education teachers, English language learner teachers, literacy specialists, school psychologists, and contracted therapists, have expertise need when we are working with children in crisis, children with special needs, and children new to Montessori. Our support staff are our partners in this huge work, and we must set up work cultures that embrace and welcome different areas of expertise and then support our whole team in ongoing, positive sharing of ideas as we seek to best serve each child.

Working with a team of highly trained specialists has been key in helping the Montessori guides understand how to best support children with special needs—without taking away any of the richness of the Montessori experience!

Orienting the adults

Teachers who have been through training and those close to them know

children. Just as we observe the children and present lessons they are ready for based on our observations, we do the same with the multitude of interactions between our supporting adults and the children. Once the adults are oriented you can have different adults come in, or take advantage of situations that arise with adults already in your room. A clear understanding of roles among children and adults (it's not Susan's job to help you get the tape you are not supposed to have!) will really support their work with everyone feeling comfortable, welcome, grounded, and without compromising concentration and the development of independence.

The children must know their roles as well. They are at school each day to do their own best work: work on academics, behavior choices, and the work of growing a wonderful community.

All children and all adults, no matter the role, have school-wide agreements, arrived at each year through our experiences together in our community with the children as involved as the guides and other adults, embodying our respect for one another and for human development.

Learning to work together

Elena Aguilar, the author of *The Art of Coaching Teams; Building Resilient Communities that Transform Schools*, taught us that "Artists are notoriously messy... there isn't a formula that can be used to build an effective team." We have taken this as an invitation to be in a safe, messy place together and as we practice our arts and produce great

work. Within this space, I have set expectations for how adults will work with one another, and with children. Adults are expected to assume good intentions and communicate constructively with each other. With children, I expect them to practice consistency, respect, openness, empathy, and above all, inclusion. Most importantly, our actions and words must convey to the child, every moment, what we believe:

- All children are good.
- Poor choices are separate from a lovely child.
- Mistakes are OK! We use them in work and behavior to learn from.
- When you are struggling, it never changes my high opinion of you.
- Every day is new. I will never ever give up on you.

We want to help our support staff and all adults working with the children to understand that we are working towards longer-term goals. If there are paper scraps on the floor, for example, rather than telling every child to pick up ten scraps we might ask the children to look all around and see if they are feeling really pleased with the way they are leaving their environment for the day, or ask if everyone has carried out their responsibilities. We would prioritize a few scraps, working towards an independent desire to care for their room, over giving the children an order that accomplishes all the scraps being off the floor but

constructive problem solving. Dr. Travis Wright has helped us understand the effects of trauma on children. Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* has inspired us to look closely at ourselves and our biases. Alicia Sojourner, a racial equity consultant manager at the YWCA here in Minneapolis, spoke to us about the developmental stages of understanding race, racism, and how to have healthy conversations with children of different ages, and worked with staff and parents prompting us to look more deeply at ourselves relative to understanding race and racism.

When the weight of this work washes over and consumes me, as I know it does all of us at times, I think of the children. I think of their voices singing their many songs...of the light in their eyes...of their awesome dance moves...their resilience...the depth of compassion and understanding they are capable of showing each other when given the skills and the space.

Some children in our school live very privileged lives. Many others are in the midst of ongoing crisis from living in poverty. Others have significant deficits in their basic skills and significant special needs, yet they come to school and 'shed' so very much to engage in working so hard; they laugh, they learn to make friends, they care for younger children and each other. They demon-

We embrace the messiness of prioritizing long-term independence over blind obedience

does nothing to support the children's growth towards independently caring for their environment. We will embrace the messiness that comes with prioritizing long-term independence in making good choices for oneself, over blind obedience and it is important that we share these ideas with our support staff.

Seeking the support of outside experts

Just as we seek the help of specialists within the classroom when it is needed, our entire community has benefited from exceptional workshops by exceptional people. Jodi Pfarr has helped us understand the cycles of generational poverty. Our staff is studying the work of Dr. Ross Greene, a clinical child psychologist and author of *Lost at School*, doing ground-breaking work on

strate significant academic growth. They also struggle, they scream, they run, they swear, they break things. All children, regardless of need, so deserve for their adults to be one hundred percent invested in this work. They need us to do better, dig deeper, and challenge ourselves, a fraction of the challenge they overcome each day, to give them our very, most-genuine best so they have the opportunity to be their best. Of course it is hard work; our children will tell us, though, that we human beings are meant to do hard work!

Liesl Taylor is the Head of School of Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School. She holds an AMI Elementary and a public school teaching license, K-6 with a specialty in 5-8 Science.

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We need your voice!

Write an article for MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic shares the stories of the public Montessori world, but we can't do it without you. Here's how you can contribute.

What should I write about? Next issue's focus is teacher training and preparation. What prepared you well? What was missing? What about access?

Experienced writers only? No! We'll work with anyone who has something to say that our readers need to hear. Not everything makes it into the paper, but first-time writers and published authors alike have appeared in these pages.

How long should it be? 900-1,000 words is great: Enough room to say something worth saying, but not so long that readers lose interest. Plus, it fits nicely on the page, with room for an image or an ad. Gretchen Shaheen and Gena Engelfried's pieces on pages 9-10 in this issue are about 1,000 words each. 1,300 to 1,400 words runs to two pages, like Kacee Weaver's article on pages 7-8. We sometimes run longer pieces, as

you'll see in this issue, but the format works best for no more than 1,500.

What's the deadline? The final deadline for the May issue is March 30th, which gives us a little time for editing and communication with writers. Submitting even earlier is fine! That gives us even more time to get your work just right.

What about pictures and a short biography? Every article looks better with a nice, high resolution photo helping to tell the story. We also need a high resolution "head shot" for the author images. "High resolution" usually means a file size of 1MB+. Add a short (50 words or fewer) biography and we're all set.

Will I get paid? Unfortunately, no. On our limited budget, we can't pay writers at this time. Ad revenue covers some costs, and our fundraising is directed as much as possible to supporting public Montessori programs. We can only thank you for adding your work and your voice to that support.

Send your submissions to David Ayer: editor@montessoripublic.org



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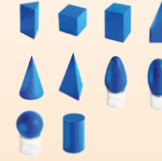
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Public Montessori in Puerto Rico

50 Public Montessori schools on an island the size of Connecticut



BY DAVID AYER

This is the remarkable, almost incredible story of the biggest, fastest expansion of public Montessori ever in the United States, that you've probably never heard of. Why not? Because it's been happening in Puerto Rico.

A little primer on Puerto Rico if you, like me before I started on this story, don't know much about the territory beyond West Side Story, hurricanes, and something about a debt crisis.

Claimed by Christopher Columbus from the Taino people as a colony in 1493, Puerto Rico was ceded to the U.S. in 1898 after the Spanish-American War. Puerto Ricans were made U.S. citizens in 1917 and despite numerous referenda and legislative initiatives have achieved neither statehood nor independence, retaining the ambiguous designation "unincorporated territory of the United States", along with Guam, Northern Mariana islands, U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and nine uninhabited islands. It is often considered the last surviving American colony.

Before Hurricane Maria last fall, Puerto Rico was most in the news for its debt crisis. There are deep complexities to the situation and abundant responsi-

power, Maria tore across the island with 100+ mph winds and truly torrential rain, flooding parts of San Juan waist-deep and destroying the power grid for all 3.4 million residents. Half the island still has no power, and the death toll, officially listed as 64, is almost certainly over 1,000. Like New Orleans after Katrina, in some ways Puerto Rico will never be the same.

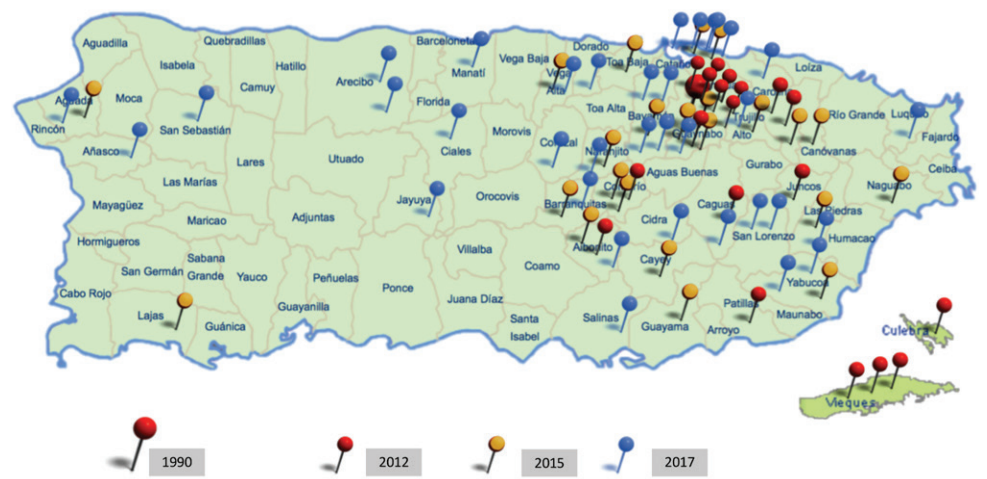
Facts and figures

If Puerto Rico were a U.S. state, it would be the poorest, just behind Mississippi, with a GDP per capita of about \$34,000. At the same time, this would make it by far the richest country (per capita) in Latin America, well ahead of Chile (\$24,000), Argentina (\$20,000) and Mexico (\$18,000), putting the island in a cluster with countries such as Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Israel. It is a highly unequal country, just out of the top ten worldwide. (The most unequal countries are in sub-Saharan Africa. The U.S. as a whole is in the middle, while the most equal countries are in eastern Europe and Scandinavia.) Puerto Rico is small and dense, packing about 3.4 million people onto an island 110 by 40 miles—think of Connecticut, quite similar in size, shape, and population, if rather different in wealth.

So the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is 100 times smaller than the U.S., poorer than the poorest state, and hampered by centuries of colonial exploitation and external control. How is it that over the last 20 years, 50 public Montessori schools have opened on the island? This is one in 25 of Puerto Rico's 1250

school. Public schools in Puerto Rico, then as now, despite periodic reform initiatives, have been characterized by low performance and graduation levels, parental dissatisfaction, and centralized, bureaucratic decision-making. Naturally, families with means opt out of the system, leaving it to serve the least

collective work, and participative governance. Puerto Rico was developing a reform model for "Community Schools" at the time, and Ponce de Leon became the model for the law passed in 1993. Community Schools in Puerto Rico function something like in-district charters found in some U.S. states: under the de-



Public Montessori schools in Puerto Rico

privileged children. In the mid-70s, Garcia attended Harvard, earning her B.A. and staying an extra year for an M. Ed. She returned to San Juan in 1980 and became a public-school teacher. The Puerto Rican Department of Education would not recognize her Harvard degrees as a teaching credential without two more years of schooling, so she worked under a special certification as an English teacher in high-need rural schools, renewing her license each year.

In 1986, Garcia went back to Harvard to pursue a Ph.D. in education, returning to Puerto Rico in the summers to work with the community in the barrio Juan Domingo in Guaynabo, a town on the outskirts of the capital, San Juan. Juan Domingo is a poor but proud community with a rich history and residents whose grandparents were the children of freed slaves. In the late 80s, the barrio was struggling to survive in the face of poverty, broken homes, drug use and violence among its youth, and a wave of gentrification. The Department of Education was closing down and consolidating small schools, including the one serving the barrio. Garcia worked with community organizers to keep the school open and maintain its autonomy, and in 1990 they succeeded, opening the Ponce de Leon school and hiring Garcia with her newly minted Ph. D as principal. From the beginning, the work was driven by principles of collaboration,

partment of education administratively, but with significant local autonomy in directing and implementing their educational program. At Ponce de Leon, as with all of the Montessori schools now in the system, community members form the core of the work force, beginning as assistants and often moving on to take teacher training, as well as serving on the school council and making decisions on a collective and consensus basis rather than majority-rule voting.

In 1994, while looking for preschool for her son, Garcia stumbled on a local independent Montessori school. She had heard about Montessori growing up from her father, who emigrated from Spain after the Spanish Civil War, before which Maria Montessori was living and working in Barcelona. Garcia was captivated by what she saw, and she also saw the synergies between Montessori and the collective, participatory principles of her community organizing work. In 1995, under the auspices of the Community Schools law, Ponce de Leon opened its first Children's House for three year-olds, the first public Montessori school in the entire system. "Those children transformed the elementary school," Garcia said, and the other teachers began studying the approach. By 2000, the whole school was a Montessori school.

That's when things really began to take off for public Montessori in Puerto Rico. Other communities began to look

The Montessori Children's House children transformed the elementary school

bility to be shared across governments and lenders, but in essence Puerto Rico has accumulated \$70 billion in debt which is unlikely to ever be repaid. The result is a political and financial struggle between Puerto Rico, the U.S. government, and outside investors, for control of the island's future.

Then, in September 2017, Hurricane Maria struck. It's difficult to convey the impact of the storm, Puerto Rico's worst ever natural disaster. Coming in the wake of Hurricane Irma weeks before, with 80,000 residents already without

or so public schools. If that ratio held in the U.S. as a whole, there would be 3,600 public Montessori schools instead of the 500 we have now. It would be as if Connecticut had 50 where today it boasts four. What is the story of this miracle, and of the dynamic and passionate educator behind it?

Ana Maria Garcia

Ana Maria Garcia Blanco, now 60, grew up in a middle-class family and, like most in her socio-economic class on the island, attended private Catholic

at Juan Domingo, which had been “at the margin”, as Garcia put it, as a community able to open a school which had been closed by the government. Schools were more interested in the community governance model than the Montessori at first, but the it caught on, and over the next five years three more public Montessori programs opened. The model, which had previously only been available in private schools, was for the first time accessible to families who couldn’t possibly pay tuition.

The Instituto Nueva Escuela

Finding trained teachers was a challenge as always—there was no training on the island. The school raised money to send community members to the U.S. and Mexico for AMI and AMS training, but the costs were almost prohibitive. In 2005, Garcia met with AMS Living Legend trainers Michael and D’Neal Duffy, who came to Puerto Rico and helped establish the Center for Montessori Education to train teachers locally. In 2008 the Instituto Nueva Escuela (INE) was founded to support the growth of public Montessori in Puerto Rico, and Garcia became the Executive Director. Today, INE operates a MACTE-accredited AMS teacher training center, staffed with “home-grown” trainers trained on the island in the 2000s. It has trained more than 500 teachers.

By 2012, four schools had grown to twelve. By 2014 that number had more than doubled to 25, and by 2014 it had reached 50. Also in 2014, the government recognized public Montessori as an official part of the department of education, and created a Secretary of Montessori Education position. (Needless to say, no comparable position exists in the U.S. Department of Education, or in any



Volunteer “brigades” distributed food and water

and the INE have launched an impressive reconstruction and reopening campaign, but the scope of work is almost overwhelming. When I’ve spoken to Garcia, it’s been when she can drive into the city where there is, at times, power and cell phone service. 30% of INE’s schools, many in remote rural areas, suffered severe structural damage after the hurricane. Roofs were torn off, walls were knocked down, and rivers ran through buildings. In the immediate aftermath, INE organized “brigades” to deliver food, water, and basic supplies to these schools, their teachers, and their communities. Many older school buildings survived, having been built in the last century to withstand hurricanes. But housing for many subsistence-income school families was a different story. INE has organized a collective housing project, using their collabora-

advantage of the slow pace of recovery. They’ve simply opened back up without approval, and when the bureaucrats finally come by, they smile and explain that, without telephone service, they took matters into their own hands.

Privatization looms

Public Montessori in Puerto Rico faces one final threat: New Orleans style privatization. After hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, Louisiana fired all its teachers, and took over almost all of the city’s public schools, turning them into charters, in the largest school privatization event anywhere, ever. The effects have been complex and controversial. New Orleans schools were in bad shape and performing poorly before the storm, with dilapidated buildings, low graduation rates, and even lower test scores. All that has changed with the charter makeover, but at a questionable cost. For every article and feature touting New Orleans’ success, it’s easy to find a comparable piece charging racism, cherry-picking, union-busting, and outright corruption.

Now public educators in Puerto Rico fear the same approach. Puerto Rico’s reform-minded Secretary of Education Julia Keleher is open to the idea: “This is a real opportunity to press the reset button,” she said, calling the rebuilding after Katrina “a point of reference”. She has been aggressive about breaking down the Department of Education’s cumbersome and inefficient administrative structure even before the storm, and there’s plenty of room for improvement. Outside of the Montessori schools, Puerto Rico’s public schools perform worse than New Orleans’ ten years ago.

But Garcia is skeptical of charters. She’s all for the local control which INE’s Community Schools exercise, but many schools are rural and remote, and a lottery-based choice model could leave students separated from their first choice by miles of unpaved road across rivers and mountains. Beyond the practicalities, Garcia raises the central ideological question about charters versus broad public education: “Let’s build a system that offers a very good school for everyone, everywhere, so people have the knowledge they need to participate in democracy. This is what would further Montessori’s vision of creating a more just society for all.”

It remains to be seen what will happen on the island. Garcia—and her unique synergy between Montessori and collaborative, participative community organizing—have shown themselves as a force to be reckoned with, and they have endured. But the forces, natural and political, arrayed against her are powerful as well. Montessorians can support her work in a number of ways. Correspondence and collaboration with the INE and its schools would be an excellent project for a Montessori elementary classroom, especially one where Spanish is spoken, and a great opportunity to get children involved. The INE GoFundMe campaign, Puerto Rico Montessori2Montessori, is still active and in need of contributions. And anyone who wishes to learn more or contribute further can contact Ana Maria directly at amgarcia@inepr.com, or her assistant, Lulu Arroyo, at larroyo@inepr.com.

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Like New Orleans after Katrina, in some ways Puerto Rico will never be the same

state department.) Violence, drug use, and drop-outs have been eliminated in the INE schools, and before Maria hit, the Institute was working with a backlog of 37 schools wanting to join the project. Over and over, across the island, in municipalities and remote rural areas, schools scheduled to be closed down for low enrollment have re-opened as Montessori schools with long waiting lists.

After Maria

But after the hurricane, public Montessori in Puerto Rico needs help. Garcia

tive and participatory governance model, with twelve communities and architects from the University of Puerto Rico, to rebuild homes.

Reopening schools has presented a different challenge: poor communication and government bureaucracy. Schools can’t officially reopen without inspection and approval from the Department of Education. In the meantime, weeks and months go by and children miss valuable hours and days of education. Some INE schools have solved this problem by taking

Montessori raises achievement, closes gaps

Lillard’s new study shows promising results with low-income children

BY DAVID AYER

Dr. Angeline Lillard, author of some of the most significant Montessori research performed to date (in her 2005 book, in 2006, and in 2012), has a substantial new study out in *Frontiers in Psychology: Montessori Preschool Elevates and Equalizes Child Outcomes: A Longitudinal Study*. The three-year study of children in AMI-recognized public Montessori schools in Hartford, Connecticut presents two dramatic results. First, Montessori children rated higher in academic achievement, social cognition, mastery orientation, and school enjoyment. Second, and even more significant for Montessori and education reform, “Montessori education greatly reduced the achievement gap across the preschool years.” The study is clearly written, with line after quotable line of strong support for Montessori interspersed with crunchy statistical data, and should really be read and studied directly, but they key findings are summarized here.

First, a little about the study and how it’s framed. Lillard starts by contrasting typical programs, which are either

followed the children for three years, testing them initially and at one year intervals thereafter. The Montessori children were enrolled in high-fidelity, AMI-recognized schools with a full three-year age span covering ages three to six, a full set of Montessori materials, and AMI trained teachers. Previous research, while suggesting positive outcomes for Montessori, has been limited by poor controls, small sample sizes, and varying levels of Montessori fidelity. This study addresses all of these issues.

Outcomes:

Academic achievement

“Although equal at the start of school, the Montessori group advanced at a higher rate across the study years.”

Academic achievement was measured by the Math, Letter-Word, and Picture Vocabulary sub-tests of the Woodcock-Johnson IIIR Tests of Achievement, a widely used instrument with high reliability and validity. Cursive letters were used for earlier items in the Letter-Word test with the Montessori children, to align with their classroom experiences. Interestingly, the differences in achievement appeared only at the end of the second year of the study, suggesting an effect of continuous exposure to Montessori. Gains were consistent

hidden in the drawer of a doll-house-sized bureau, and then shown a doll who they were told had not seen inside the drawer. They were asked if the doll knew what was inside the drawer, and if the doll had seen inside the drawer.”

Again, the Montessori children started out similar to the control group and improved steadily over three years, showing significant gains after two years.

Mastery orientation

“Children [in] a Montessori program were more likely to have a growth mindset by the latter half of their pre-school years.”

Mastery orientation, a personal quality associated with a “growth mindset—a belief that with effort one can master challenges and increase one’s abilities,” was measured with a test in which children were presented with a simple puzzle and an unsolvable puzzle, and then offered the opportunity to go back to one or the other. By the second year, the Montessori children were more likely to choose the harder puzzle, saying things like “Because I think I can do it.”

School enjoyment

“Montessori children were relatively more positive about school-related activities ... [suggesting that] achievement gains were not at the expense of their enjoying school.”

School enjoyment was measured with a questionnaire, and young children’s tendency to give the highest possible ratings on such instruments was controlled for by some clever testing protocols.

Executive function, social problem solving, and creativity

Although previous work has shown gains for Montessori children across these domains, in this study the Montessori and control groups showed no differences, except for executive function, which showed a statistically significant advantage for Montessori in four year-olds which declined to a slight advantage by the end of the study. Interestingly, however, initial executive function measurements, which typically predict academic achievement, did so in the control group but not in the Montessori children. Montessori children with low executive function scores

showed the same academic gains as their more able peers.

Achievement gaps

Even with these striking outcomes for Montessori children in the study, by far the most powerful finding is the effect on the so-called “achievement gap”. First broadly recognized in the 1966 Coleman Report, the gap is the persistent disparity in educational achievement across socioeconomic, racial, and gender divides. Now considered along with an “opportunity gap”, which recognizes the disparate opportunities and life experiences across those same divides, the gap has been stubbornly resistant to decades of education reform, to the extent that “zip code is destiny” has become an education byword.

But Lillard’s study suggests otherwise: “Montessori education greatly reduced the achievement gap across the preschool years.”

The high correlation between income and academic achievement is well established in education research, and was present in the control group. Surprisingly, the correlation in the Montessori group at the end of the study was half that of the control. Over the course of the study, the low-income Montessori children made significantly greater academic gains compared to the control group, so the gap at the initial measurement was reduced by two-thirds by the end, to a statistical dead heat. According to Lillard, another year of Montessori might have eliminated the gap entirely. Within the control group, the gap remained the same. This is a revolutionary finding with have enormous implications for education reform and social justice in the United States.

Why Montessori?

Lillard follows up with some intriguing speculations about the reasons for the observed effects, and directions for future research. For academic achievement, it’s possible that the Montessori materials themselves, with their characteristics of embodied learning, embedded spatial relationships (in mathematics materials in particular), and inherent order, and their logical and interesting nature, might be responsible. Social cognition and Theory of Mind outcomes could be due to mixed-age classrooms, which offer a range of social interactions; limited materials, which create opportunities for social

Montessori education greatly reduced the achievement gap across the preschool years

teacher-led and didactic, or free and open, with more play but less academic content. Montessori bridges that divide, offering child-directed, freely-chosen activity with deep academic content, elements which are known to drive positive outcomes. Montessori, which, Lillard observes, “aligns with principles and practices that a century of research has shown are more optimal for child development”, is an excellent candidate for preschool research.

Structurally, the study considered 141 children who entered a lottery for Hartford-area public Montessori schools, of whom half entered Montessori and half did not, providing a randomized, demographically similar sample. The study

across academic areas, even when results were controlled for family income, gender, and executive function.

Social cognition

“Social cognition developed more rapidly in children attending Montessori schools.”

Social cognition was measured with tasks from Wellman and Liu’s Theory of Mind scale (Knowledge Access, Contents False Belief, Diverse Beliefs, and Hidden Emotion), which measures children’s ability to reason about other people’s perceptions and beliefs, and predicts later social competence. For one task, “Children were shown what was



Enjoying school, building mastery

conflicts to arise; or an emphasis on concentration. Mastery orientation could relate to the Montessori emphasis on intrinsic motivation rather than external rewards, and to the focus on repetition towards mastery built into the materials and the curriculum. School enjoyment could spring from student choice. Even a negative result, where executive function did not predict academic achievement for the Montessori children, might arise from the differentiated instruction integral to Montessori: teachers may be supporting children with lower executive function more effectively. All of these are interesting avenues for future study.

Maybe it's the teachers

It's also possible that Montessori teachers, in addition to or instead of the curriculum, are responsible for the gains. Perhaps prospective Montessori teachers are just better teachers to start with. Montessori teacher education at Montessori Training Center Northeast, an AMI training center in Hartford where most of the teachers trained, while intense and rigorous, is not so selective as to have higher standards than some early childhood education programs, but it may attract different kinds of people.

Or maybe the training itself makes better teacher. An AMI course typically involves nine months of lectures, demonstration, observation and practice teaching, the creation of individual teaching manuals ("albums"), and oral and written exams, delivered by trainers

with at least five years in the classroom and a multi-year trainer apprenticeship. And, rather than surveying a range of education models, it focuses intensely on Montessori theory and practice. Montessori training supports a loving and warm outlook towards children coupled with high expectations, attitudes which are known to support academic achievement. All of these aspects are recommended for further study.

And further study is what we should expect. These findings:

"High fidelity Montessori preschool programs are more effective than other business-as-usual school programs at elevating the performance of all children, while also equalizing outcomes for subgroups of children who typically have worse outcomes."

are provocative and compelling, and Lillard points to 400+ public Montessori programs in the U.S. as sites for broader research.

A large-scale study should examine outcomes in many more public Montessori schools, with an eye to Montessori implementation fidelity, as well as teachers and their training. The present study supports the legitimacy of such a study to determine more definitively if Montessori education should be implemented at scale.

David Ayer is the Editorial Director of MontessoriPublic. This article is reprinted from MontessoriPublic.org.

The public calendar

February 16 – 19

AMI/USA Refresher Course

THE COMPLETE CLASSROOM
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

February 16 – 19

NAMTA Conference

NAMTA'S ADOLESCENT EVENT
AT THE AMI/USA REFRESHER COURSE
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Feb. 23 – 25

MEPI Annual Conference

SCIENTIST, SERVANT, SAINT—
THE MONTESSORI GUIDE
KIAWAH ISLAND RESORT, SOUTH CAROLINA

March 8 – 11

NAMTA Conference

COMING TOGETHER AROUND THE CHILD:
PARENT PARTNERSHIPS
PORTLAND, OREGON

March 22 – 25

AMS Annual Conference

MONTESSORI: INSIDE & OUT
DENVER, COLORADO

April 20-22

NAMTA Conference

HISTORY AS THE BACKBONE FOR
MONTESSORI EDUCATION
CLEVELAND, OHIO

June 27–July 1

Montessori for Social Justice Conference

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

August 4–18

Educateurs Sans Frontières Assembly

SUSTAINABILITY INSTITUTE,
STELLENBOSCH, SOUTH AFRICA

November 8–11

The Montessori Foundation/IMC Annual Conference

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