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Hands-on learning goes virtual

How did Montessori schools adapt to distance learning?



BY **KATIE BROWN, ANGELA MURRAY,** AND **PATRICIA BARTON**

As early as January of this year, "doing" Montessori online would have been unthinkable to many Montessorians. Hands-on learning; learning within and from a diverse, multi-age community; practical life—these hallmarks of the method simply don't transfer to the screen. How could one begin to think about Montessori teaching and learning outside of the context of the prepared environment of the classroom? Even as SmartBoards and iPads have become ubiquitous in traditional classrooms around the country, Montessori schools, by and large, have remained steadfastly analog.

Then came the pandemic. As COVID-19 took hold in the US, schools and districts around the country were forced to close their doors. Closures that were originally scheduled to last days or weeks stretched into months. But even as school buildings remained shuttered, schools had a legal, and moral, obligation to educate children. Educators sprang into action to develop distance learning plans—including public Montessorians.

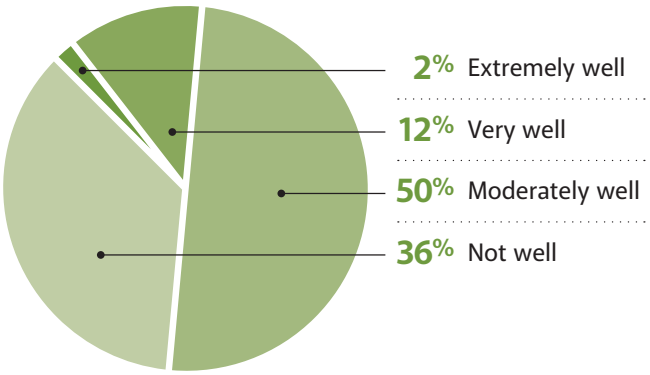
Watching these events unfold, researchers from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, the Center for Montessori Research at University of Kansas, and the University of Buffalo came together to document and try to understand this unprecedented translation of Montessori pedagogy to distance learning. The fundamental question driving our research was, "How are Montessori educators interpreting and applying Montessori principles during distance learning?"

To answer this question, we created a survey, using the Montessori Logic Model as a framework for the fundamental elements of Montessori. We asked participants both how they thought about principles like freedom and discipline, and what they actually did while schools were closed in the spring of 2020. Montessorians from all over the world responded, including 50 public Montessorians in 23 US states, as well as 5 from Canada.

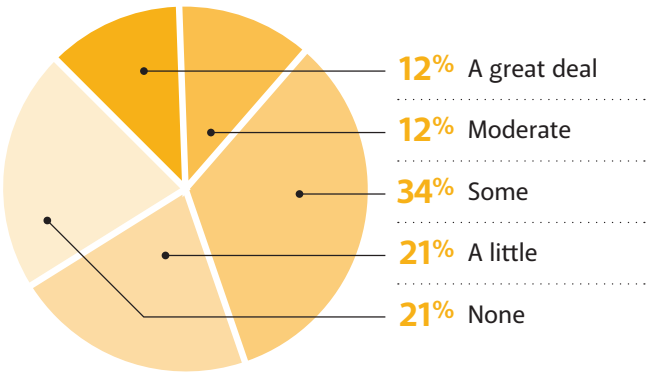
Respondents were mostly self-identified white women over 35, located in medium- to large-sized cities. Most (92%) were classroom teachers; the rest (8%) were school leaders. Two-thirds work with

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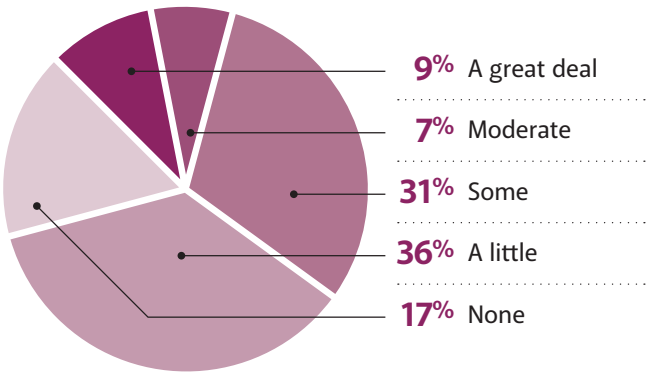
How well did you uphold Montessori principles and values during distance learning?



How much guidance did you get from administration for choosing distance learning strategies?



How much support did you get from administration for developing distance learning strategies?



elementary-aged children, and one-third work in early childhood. All reported engaging in distance learning during school closures this past spring.

What did distance learning look like for these folks? Many of them reported that they were largely left to develop practices for themselves; only a quarter of participants reported receiving "a great deal" or "a moderate amount" of guidance from their school's administration about what strategies to employ. More than 20% reported receiving no guidance whatsoever. Respondents identified three top approaches:

- videoconference interactions with students
- electronic learning management systems such as Google Classroom
- directly providing families with digital devices and/or access to technology for learning.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these are all digital strategies. Only 15% of respondents provided physical materials or paper packets to families.

Nonetheless, respondents reported striving to achieve a balance between digital and analog activities—and for the most part, they seem to have succeeded. On average, participants report that children were spending about 50% of their distance learning time on screen-based activities and 50% on non-screen-based ones. As the research base around distance learning during this pandemic develops, it will be interesting to learn if Montessori practitioners were perhaps more committed to, and more successful in, achieving this balance compared to their counterparts in traditional schools.

Montessorians generally have a reputation for ambivalence toward technology, so we were curious to know how this tech-heavy teaching experience was affecting their attitudes toward technology--especially given anecdotal reports of widespread login problems, unstable Internet connections, etc. A quarter of respondents said that the experience of distance learning has led them to a more favorable attitude toward the use of technology in Montessori classrooms, while 59% say their attitudes are unchanged. Only 16% report a less favorable attitude toward technology in the classroom as a result of their distance learning experience. The long-term impacts of this experience on Montessorians' relationship with technology, once the pandemic ends, remain to be seen.

How are Montessori educators interpreting and applying Montessori principles during distance learning?

The individualization so integral to Montessori learning seems to have suffered somewhat with students learning from home. One-third of respondents distributed assignments and materials to students according to their grade level, while only 17% personalized these for individual students. Certainly, there are a number of very good reasons why public Montessorians may have struggled to personalize instruction effectively. Schools and teachers had very little time to plan or prepare for distance learning, and the pandemic took a psychological toll on children, families, and educators alike. Our survey suggests that many teachers received what they felt to be inadequate guidance and support from their leadership on how to implement distance learning. Schools may well be better prepared going into the fall term, with the benefit of experience from the spring and preparation time over the summer.

Participants indicated that preparing the environment for learning remained a key element of their role as a Montessori teacher, albeit one that looked different during distance learning. Many spoke to the need to thoughtfully prepare the digital environment for children by selecting appropriate and engaging activities that children could do at home, both online and off. Some described their learning management systems as virtual Montessori environments. It's clear that teachers came to view families as partners in the work of preparing the environment; respondents spoke of the need to form closer and deeper relationships with families in support of children, and the powerful learning that can take place as a result.

As one participant put it, "The parents, teachers, and children truly must be a team. We support the parents as well as the child. The better connection we have with the parents, the better we can work together to help the child." This included support for establishing routines and procedures for distance learning in the home, as well as support and encouragement for practical life activities. This collaboration may have lasting implications for home-school relationships, as 65% of participants indicated that they are now interested in engaging with families more in the future.

Ensuring equitable access to the learning environment was also part of this preparation. In some cases, this meant physically connecting with families to provide technological devices and wifi hotspots, or supporting them remotely through technical difficulties. Some teachers expressed frustration with the technological barriers they encountered in distance learning; many never expected to find themselves in

the role of "tech support," and others struggled to learn the ropes of the various learning management systems and digital tools they employed.

When teaching from home, teachers indicated they also thought about preparing their own workspace. One respondent described the process of "prepar[ing] a peaceful, uncluttered space" to video lessons from home. Others described the process of "staging" for both live and recorded video presentations, making sure they had adequate lighting, all necessary materials, and the proper camera angle to provide a clear view of the lesson. These considerations reflect the traditional Montessori attendance to precision, clarity, and beauty.

Finally, teachers thought about nurturing the social-emotional connections with and among students as part of creating an environment conducive to learning. One-fifth of participants reported that they met one-on-one with each child regularly. The vast majority (80%) felt that they were able to create a positive emotional climate for learning in the virtual environment.

Several respondents indicated that they came away from this experience with a newfound appreciation for the importance of the relationship between teacher and student. Teachers found creative ways to build community in classrooms, including virtual social time, such. as having lunch together over Zoom and online circle time. Some reported explicitly teaching techniques for stress management and self-care, recognizing the need to care for the whole child. These responses reflect a desire to honor the constructivist roots of Montessori by creating an environment where learning happens in relationship with others—albeit at a distance.

Overall, the Montessorians who participated in this survey seemed to feel pretty good about how they translated Montessori to distance learning. When asked, "How well do you feel you were able to uphold Montessori principles and values during distance learning?" 64% responded "moderately well" (50%), "very well" (12%), or "extremely well" (2%). This suggests that perhaps Montessori and distance learning are not as incompatible as previously thought. As one participant put it, "Montessori is more than our materials."

The research team has plans to publish and present findings from this research project in its entirety in scholarly journals and conferences. A follow-up study is also planned for the fall.

Katie Brown is the Director of Professional Learning at NCMPS. Angela Murray is the Director for the KU Center for Montessori Research. Patricia Barton is the Coordinator of AZ Montessori Teacher Education Program, Director of Desert Shadows Montessori, and a doctoral student at University of Buffalo.

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