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Montessori research update: COVID-19 edition

The pandemic has called for flexibility and patience

BY **NCMPS STAFF**

2019-2020 was supposed to be a banner year for Montessori research.

A $3.3 million federally funded study led by Ann-Marie Faria and Karen Manship at the American Institutes for Research and Angeline Lillard at the University of Virginia was entering its second year, and the Brady Education Foundation's $3 million research initiative had pivoted to a three-pronged project to examine the underlying issues of equity and access in Montessori.

The pandemic has obviously made it challenging to continue collecting data in schools. Dr. Lillard and the Brady Foundation have provided *MontessoriPublic* with updates on the state of these projects.

From Dr. Angeline Lillard:

Parents and districts frequently ask of Montessori: What is the evidence that this school program works? Does this program help address racial and income achievement gaps? And what changes to the school program are allowed that augment or at least do not interfere with any benefits? In July 2018, *MontessoriPublic* reported on our $3.3 million federally funded Montessori research project addressing these issues using a rigorous research design, taking advantage of existing school lotteries. Work began that fall on recruiting schools, and the first round of data collection was completed in the fall of 2019.

The pandemic has thrown a wrench in so much, including children's schooling, and therefore also in the study. With widespread school closures, few children are attending school in person. Flexibility is key during the pandemic, and so the study leads and the US Department of Education decided to shift gears and wait until children are back in Montessori classrooms to re-launch the study. The plan is to begin again with students and families who enroll in high-quality Montessori sites across the country for the 21-22 school year. To do so, the study team will recruit a new cohort of children at many more schools in spring 2021, and follow them as long as funds are available—at least through spring of 2023. The study will still survey teachers, observe classrooms, and collect direct assessments with children. It will describe the range of public Montessori experiences, and document if and how attending a high-quality Montessori preschool changes children's academic and social-emotional outcomes. As the first major federally funded study of public Montessori, it promises to provide crucial information about Montessori preschool, if participation rates are sufficiently high.



Dr. Angeline Lillard

Six public Montessori schools participated in the study this first year, and several others tried to participate but were unable to due to district restrictions or insufficient wait lists for their PK3 classes. A group of teachers filled out a survey showing the range of Montessori practices offered at these schools. All of the information gathered from this initial run will be very useful as the study goes into high gear post-COVID.

The study's biggest challenge has been getting enough Montessori schools to participate; large numbers of children are needed to accurately address the study's questions. To be successful in the project's mission to better understand whether Montessori and its different iterations impact

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child outcomes, they need over 650 participants who applied to a Montessori school for their 3-year-old year and were randomly selected to attend or not, based on a lottery. The study team is excited to continue partnering with current schools and with additional schools that are needed for this important study. If your school qualifies (random lottery at age 3, and children on the waitlist) and you would like to participate, please contact Angeline Lillard (lillard@virginia.edu) or Karen Manship (kmanship@air.org) as soon as possible; planning will go into high gear early in 2021.



From the Brady Education Foundation:

In early 2020, the original design of the research initiative was revised to focus on three related topics led by teams from three separate institutions: Child Trends, the Riley Institute at Furman University, and the University of Kansas Center for Montessori Research.

Child Trends: The focus of this grant is to conduct a policy study investigating the extent to which access to public Pre-K Montessori programs is equitable. The timing of this work has been impacted by COVID because in addition to using administrative data sets to explore equity and access, the work includes gathering data from school administrators about their enrollment practices as well as from parents about their experiences concerning access to these programs. They have restarted data collection with school administrators (after halting last spring when the pandemic hit) but have not yet started the work with parents (at this time, it is not clear when it will be possible to pick up that aspect of the study). Concerning the school administrators, given everything going on right now, they have modified the survey to include questions concerning COVID (such as whether they are delivering their program in person, on-line, or some type of hybrid approach) as well as whether they are considering making any changes to enrollment practices given the national focus of social justice and equity issues.

Riley Institute at Furman University: The focus of this study is to use administrative data sets from states and school districts to conduct a quasi-experimental study investigating the impact of Montessori in the public sector on BIPOC students and those in low-income families. Although the study does not involve data collection, it has been impacted by COVID as well as many states and districts are not accepting research applications at this time. However, they have been able to obtain a good amount of data and plan to conduct some analyses at the state and district levels as they wait until they are able to submit applications for the other data sets.

University of Kansas Center for Montessori Research: There are two main aims of this work: 1) to continue development of a measure of Montessori implementation in the classroom, and 2) hold a Montessori research retreat with an enhanced focus on equity. COVID has impacted both of these as well. Concerning the measurement development, this has been put on hold for now since schools are either not in-person or are open but using many measures to mitigate transmission of the virus. The hope is that this work we be able to restart in the fall of 2021. Concerning the research retreat, given COVID, the retreat cannot take place in-person as originally planned. However, the good news is that they will instead hold a virtual conference on equity and justice issues in Montessori research in January 2021 hosted by the AREA Montessori SIG (special interest group), co-chaired by Dr. Angela Murray (University of Kansas, Center for Montessori Research) and Dr. Stephanie Currenton (Boston University).

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