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Montessori teachers adapt to distance learning

The pandemic reshaped Montessori views on technology



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

Montessorians have long resisted the integration of technology into teaching and learning that has characterized conventional schools in recent decades. Though attitudes toward technology among Montessori educators have not been widely studied, anecdotal evidence suggests a limited embrace of digital learning, particularly for very young children. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, many educators had little choice but to leverage electronic resources to continue teaching students as schools across the country closed their doors and moved to distance learning.

A team of researchers from the University of Buffalo, the University of Kansas, and the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector quickly came together to document and study this move to distance learning for Montessori schools, asking, "How are Montessori educators interpreting and applying Montessori principles during distance learning?" We wrote about the international survey results in the Fall 2020 issue of MontessoriPublic (*Hands-on learning goes virtual*).

For the study, we also collected social media data to capture the conversations Montessorians were having about distance learning in real time. Data from these posts, as well as from the 55 public school Montessori educators who completed the survey, suggest that the experience of distance learning in spring of 2020 reshaped and illuminated teachers' relationships with technology.

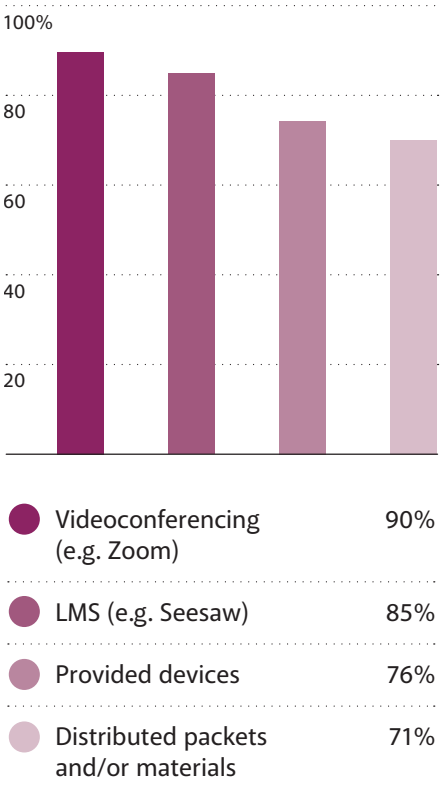
Though "distance learning" is as old as the correspondence courses popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, our data indicate that digital technology was a key component of distance learning for Montessori students during the spring 2020 school closures. 90% of survey participants reported using Zoom (or similar platforms) to interact with children. Teachers reported using Zoom to "zoom in and zoom out," to parallel the classroom work time. Almost as many (85%) reported using an electronic learning management system (LMS), such as Google Classroom, Schoology, or Seesaw. Over three-quarters of participants indicated that their schools provided electronic devices to families for use in distance learning, though almost as many (71%) reported distributing packets and/or physical materials. Other digital tools and resources such as FlipGrid and Khan Academy were also employed to support learning, as well as the much older and more familiar technology of the phone call.

According to our survey, children's time was spent approximately balanced between screen-based engagements like Zoom meetings and online activities, and hands-on activities such as practical life exercises. Almost half of survey participants provided digital versions of Montessori materials for children to manipulate electronically through apps or websites, while about a third used electronic resources like Natural Geographic videos to facilitate experiences with nature. Technology was also used to facilitate observation at a distance; 40% observed students working via videoconference, while 65% relied on parent-reported data, including narrative and photos.

In reviewing the qualitative data from open-ended survey questions and social media posts, several themes emerged. For one, Montessorians came to think about learning the various

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Distance learning strategies employed



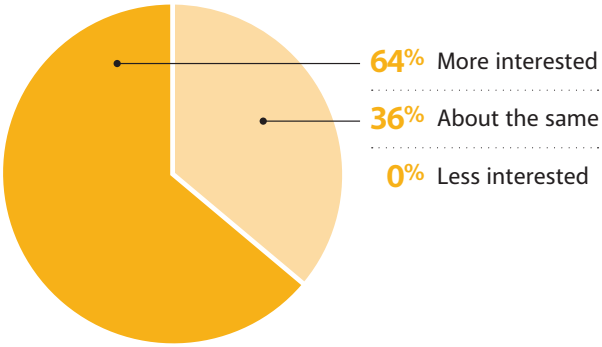
instructional technologies (Zoom, LMS, etc.) as part of the preparation of the adult. Survey participants "had to learn how to use technology to teach concepts taught in the Montessori classroom," an "overwhelming" experience that one participant said "reminded me we are learners first." The speed with which this learning had to occur undoubtedly contributed to the sense of overwhelm palpable in social media conversations among Montessori educators.

Online learning also created the need for new grace and courtesy lessons. Survey participants described how they had to establish norms and procedures for navigating online spaces as a learning community. This included muting oneself when not speaking, raising a hand to speak, and appropriate use of the chat feature. In a social media post, one teacher described helping students "practice muting and unmuting themselves," a procedure that must be taught and reinforced like so many others in the face-to-face classroom.

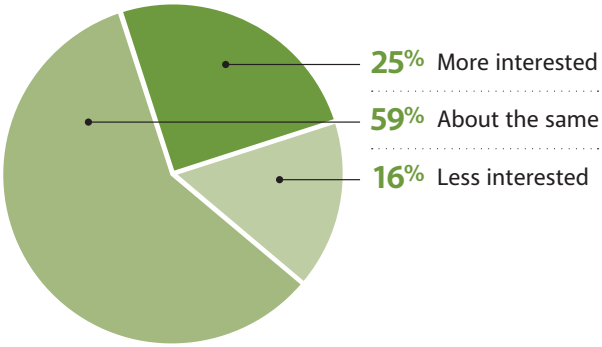
Our data indicated that digital learning created new considerations for the prepared environment for learning. In a physical classroom, teachers might devote considerable time to ensuring that the array of materials out on the shelves was appropriate to the age and developmental level of their students; the materials available at the beginning of the year might be different from those put out at the end of the year, for example. Similarly, survey participants discussed their quest to "find age and developmentally appropriate activities online to share with my families." Given the wealth of options available on the Internet, and stark variations in quality, this can be a daunting task.

Teachers also expressed concern with ensuring that the digital environment was easily accessible for students—and families. Survey participants and social media posters were acutely aware that many children, especially younger ones, relied on older family members to access Zoom, LMSes, email, and other digital tools. Participants strove to "make directions for logging in, zoom meeting schedules, etc. clear and simple for parents and children." Comments like these suggest that although technology created a critical connection with children, it had the potential to create obstacles as well. Our data suggest that in this sense, teachers were preparing the digital learning environment not just for the child, but for the family. Still, though some assistance may be necessary, especially for younger learners, teachers in our sample clearly tried to promote independence by explicitly teaching digital navigation skills, actively selecting resources and tools that children could engage with on their own.

Interest in engaging families more in the future



Attitudes towards technology, compared to before the pandemic



In preparing the digital environment, teachers devoted considerable energy to providing choice and access to hands-on activities. Though many survey participants and social media posters described providing options for children, they wrestled with how to do this in the absence of their Montessori materials: students "needed very clear definitions of what to do and seemed overwhelmed with too much choice, especially with no materials there." Many teachers expressed the need for children to have some physical manipulatives at home in order to fully engage in online lessons; this probably explains why a substantial portion of survey respondents (over two-thirds) reported providing families with packets and/or physical materials. Survey participants and social media posters alike also discussed the use of digital versions of Montessori materials for students to manipulate electronically. In terms of choice and hands-on learning, teachers were doing their best to give students a learning experience that provided some continuity from their time in the physical classroom.

One of the most pervasive themes to emerge from our data, however, was the way in which virtual learning impacted teachers' relationships with families. Supporting optimal human development has always been a joint

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endeavor between schools and families, but virtual learning made this partnership more salient than ever before. One survey respondent described families as "part of the prepared environment," while another reported, "I felt like even more a part of the child's family as I was in their home daily (via computer)." Many survey participants and social media users reported that nurturing their relationships with families and supporting their efforts to implement distance learning programs at home constituted a large part of their work: "The better connection we have with the parents, the better we can work together to help the child." Though the traditional Montessori triad consists of the child, the adult (usually thought of as the guide), and the environment, one survey participant suggested that in distance learning, this becomes more of a quadrilateral: families "are the intermediary between teacher and student."

Teachers seemed to have mixed feelings about this reliance on families in distance learning. One participant described the difficulty of promoting independence when children were dependent on family members to access their virtual learning materials: "having little or no parent intervention with a student's work...was the hardest." Another participant expressed concern over the lack of limits around screen time for children. Collaborating with parents who had more conventional schooling experiences themselves wasn't always easy, and philosophical differences between teachers and families were sometimes apparent: "Some parents want to teach the work how they learned (math rules, etc.). It is important for us to educate parents as to why our method is being used for the children to gain understanding." This quote reflects a change in the power dynamic between teachers and families, with teachers now sharing control over a pedagogy that was once exclusively their domain. Though these disconnects between home and school have long been a topic of discussion for Montessori educators, many found them even more apparent during distance learning.

In another sense, however, this closer partnership with families also seems to have led many teachers to a place of greater understanding of students' home lives and issues of equity in their school communities. For many, the move to distance learning highlighted disparities in access to technology, as many families lacked access to high-speed Internet, printers, and/or devices for virtual learning. Participants acknowledged that family capacity to support children with distance learning varied according to caregivers' own professional responsibilities. Teachers also bore witness to the ripple effects of the pandemic itself and the economic hardship it triggered: "Some families are struggling just to get through each day (with work or unemployment, illness, childcare) while others are more involved in their kids' education than they ever had been." Technical knowledge also varied from family to family, and many teachers alluded to the stress of their newfound role as "tech support." Nonetheless, almost two-thirds of survey respondents indicated that as a result of distance learning, they are interested in engaging families more in the future. The remaining one-third of participants planned to engage families at about the same level they had before the pandemic; none reported a desire to work with families less.

Virtual learning brought some new roles for Montessori teachers (like tech support), but many reported that in other ways, their role as a teacher remained fundamentally unchanged. Some indicated that their role as a guide was clearer than ever, with an "increased sense of the teacher as guide/facilitator, [and] students as agents of their own learning." Conversely, the absence of peer support meant that learners were in some cases more reliant on the teacher: "One of my biggest frustrations of remote learning was that classroom norms around peer teaching and helping disappeared, so students came to me, their teacher, with problems, rather than seeking a peer first." Still, teachers leaned into their role as builders of community and connections. For some, maintaining these connections required more conscious effort in the virtual environment. For others, virtual learning brought new opportunities, like increased one-on-one time with students.

"Distance learning" is as old as the correspondence courses popular in the 18th and 19th centuries

Overall, survey respondents seem satisfied with their ability to "do Montessori" digitally in spring of 2020. When asked how well they felt able to uphold Montessori principles and values during distance learning, 64% responded with "moderately well," "very well," or "extremely well," with "moderately well" being the most common response (50%). Only 36% of respondents selected "not well" or "slightly well." Perhaps more surprising, one-quarter of participants indicated that they had more favorable attitudes toward the use of technology in learning than they'd

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had before the pandemic. Only 16% reported developing less favorable views, while the majority of participants (59%) said their attitude toward technology was unchanged. Perhaps this reflects a growing acceptance of the centrality of technology in modern life; as one participant put it, "our AMI trained guides [had] to wrestle with the fact that technology has a role (currently) in all our lives. And that the way that our new world is tethered to the internet it is becoming just as integral as electric lights and HVAC." What remains to be seen is what lasting impact these digital tools will have on the Montessori movement once children are back in classrooms.

Notably, our data collection ended at the end of the spring 2020 semester and does not capture how Montessori distance learning has evolved during the fall semester. Some challenges likely persist, while others have undoubtedly improved with time, trial, and error. New dynamics in the relationship between Montessori and technology may have emerged. Perhaps, though, the biggest takeaway from this strange and challenging time in Montessori education has been the resilience and robustness of the Montessori Method itself and its practitioners. As one social media user said, "what we found was the biggest components of this experiment had already been proven; the Montessori Method. Our guides are experts at the Montessori Method. We found it was only the use of technology that had to be perfected."

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