

Distance learning in a Primary classroom

A tiny program does everything it can to connect



BY **DAVID AYER**
WITH **KATY FONTNEAU**
AND **ROSA ORTIZ**

“When this started in March, we didn’t know what was going to happen.” Katy had a smile on her face when she said this, but it was rueful one. “We just sent home some stuff—library books—some never came back, those books are gone, but that’s OK.”

Katy Fontneau is a Primary teacher at Alder Montessori, a two-classroom Montessori early childhood program embedded in Alder Elementary, a public school in the Reynolds school district on the edge of Portland, Oregon. (MontessoriPublic profiled Alder in our very first issue, *I Have A Dream Oregon Dreams of Montessori*, Winter 2016.) Reynolds is a heavily inequity-impacted district and Alder Elementary is a Title I school serving a marginalized and minoritized population, mostly Hispanic but with 27 languages spoken at the school and a community including immigrants, undocumented residents, and families experiencing homelessness.

Alder Montessori, like all Oregon schools, pivoted to distance learning last spring and hasn’t yet been back to face-to-face school. MontessoriPublic



The way it used to be, and will be again soon

spoke with Fontneau and classroom assistant Rosa Ortiz about the Montessori approach to distance learning for young children over the past nine months.

The program worked with the school district to get technology needs met, but resources were limited in the spring. Kindergarten-age children were loaned tablets, but three- and four-year-olds didn’t get them until later. The Montessori team did not set up a virtual classroom right away since not all the children would have access, but continued to stay in contact with children and families with “lots of phone calls” Fontneau said. Staff made one-on-one video calls and set up a website hosting videos of read-alouds and short lessons including letters written on a chalkboard and yoga routines.

Ortiz, as a Spanish-speaking member of the school community and mother of a six-year-old girl in the class, found her role expanded right

away, making videos and providing support. “I was on a lot of phone calls from moms, answering questions, trying to explain things to the mom or whoever was home.”

In the fall, as distance learning resumed in Oregon, support from the district ramped up. Every kindergarten got access to a loaned tablet and staff were issued laptops. Children and families got accounts on Zoom, Seesaw, and other apps, and were given login badges for Clever, a “single sign-on” learning management platform the district used. The district gave out hotspots to expand internet access. Three- and four-year-olds were included in the technology program after some administrative tangles were unwound (in Oregon, as in many states, younger children are under different agencies and funding streams). Seesaw in particular was popular with staff

continues >

and families, seen as the most “kid-friendly” of the apps.

As fall progressed into winter, the routine settled into a daily Zoom class for the whole group, featuring finger plays, stories, and other “circle time” activities, followed by breakout sessions. The two small classrooms joined into one group of about 40 children, for efficiency’s sake and also some mixing that wasn’t possible before.

The five staff—two teachers and three assistants—took on shared roles leading breakouts, breaking down some of the conventional “guide/assistant” division. Breakout activities included lessons, conversations, “bring me” games, and even work with materials. Teachers and assistants dropped off handmade and improvised materials every week. “It’s amazing what you can do with Play-Doh,” Fontneau said. “The kids made letters and numbers—it’s more interactive, not just staring at a screen.” One week every family got a bag of constructive triangles cut out of paper. Another week, older children made their own bead bars with beads and pipe cleaners. Class time was about an hour a day, although some younger children stopped sooner, while older children sometimes wanted to go lon-

maybe even engaging them in Montessori activities when the camera was off. “Well...maybe,” Ortiz told me. Sometimes the families were large or in shared living spaces, “with nine kids in one room. There might be an adult in there somewhere...” The reality of this community was that many parents were “essential workers” in agriculture, health care, and service jobs. Children might be with older siblings or other relatives during the day, in a somewhat noisy environment, often wearing headphones to attend class.

Ortiz said her six-year-old daughter enjoyed virtual school, and liked to interact with the apps and with other children on video calls. At the same time, she missed school, and especially the physical and social interactions with other children and adults. For three- and four-year-olds, it was a little harder to tell how effective online learning was, but overall Ortiz felt that families felt connected and that the district was responsive to their needs and concerns.

I asked Fontneau and Ortiz about next year, assuming face-to-face school resumes. Will there be “dropped stitches” that need to be made up for these children in this intense stage of



Fuzzy math

Teachers and assistants dropped off handmade and improvised materials every week

ger. Staff supplemented these sessions with one-on-one video calls, as needed or by parent request. These might be regular weekly meetings or one-offs, often driven by a child’s need for more language development and exposure to conversation in English.

I asked if this brought families “inside the classroom” in a way, showing more of what happens at school and

development? “We plan to just meet the children where they are and I’m not going to worry about what they’re missing—just keep them moving along and get then what they need,” Fontneau said. The biggest deficit, if there is one, may be around social-emotional learning, or grace and courtesy. Children haven’t needed to manage their personal space around a larger group,

and there will be norms to be learned or re-learned.

Finally, I wanted to know what the “lessons learned” were, or how things might be different moving forward because of the pandemic. Both teachers appreciated the support and collaboration from Reynolds School District. This is still a new and developing relationship, with the program housed in the school but not yet a fully integrated element.

And there have been some discoveries around team collaboration as well. With all five staff running the two classes as one group, the interchange among adults and children has opened up new possibilities. There have been some insights into the mixed-age group as well. The youngest children did not get the bead-and-pipe-cleaner activity, as it was deemed too challenging. Because it took place in breakout groups, they also did not see older children doing the work, a hallmark of Montessori mixed-age practice. On the other hand, every child received the set of constructive triangles—a lesson that might not ordinarily have been given

continues >

to everyone. But what's the harm, really? Especially when put against discoveries that might be made.

Both Ortiz and Fontneau have also become fans of Seesaw, and could see continuing to make use of the tool. After all, many of these children probably already interact with screens in their home lives. This year, children made short recordings of themselves singing a song, telling a story, or striking a yoga pose, that Fontneau described as "amazing." And Ortiz appreciated the connection to children from the other classroom and the potential for family engagement.

Alder hopes to be back face-to-face, maybe before the end of the year, and to get back to doing hands-on Montessori. But if there's anything to be learned and gleaned from this experience, this team seems ready to take advantage of it.

Katy Fontneau is a Montessori-trained and Oregon-licensed bilingual teacher.

Rosa Ortiz started at Alder as a part-time volunteer with an early childhood parent group and is now a credentialed classroom assistant and a key community liaison and translator.

MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

NATIONAL CENTER for
MONTESSORI in the
PUBLIC SECTOR

Subscribe at montessoripublic.org

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2021 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector