

Minneapolis public Montessori: Seward abides

**Seward Montessori
has persisted
through the
decades**



CAM GORDON

Starting in the early 1980s, Montessori advocates in Minneapolis leveraged the magnet school movement to establish one Lower Elementary classroom in a shared school. That led to more classrooms, and between 1995 and 2015 public Montessori in Minneapolis peaked with two district schools, and one charter school, including one that provided Montessori middle school up to the 8th grade.

That school is Seward Montessori school. Following recent turmoil and a longer-term decline in public Montessori options in the city, it is the only one still operating today.

Obstacles to overcome

While all schools face hurdles, some of Seward's challenges have been unique.

In recent years, Seward Montessori has not only had to contend with district wide restructuring, general declines in enrollment across the city and the COVID-19 pandemic, but also with the well-publicized killing of George Floyd and subsequent riots that started within blocks of the school, as well as the most recent federal immigration enforcement efforts that have disrupted schools throughout the Twin Cities area and beyond.

The school is located within one mile of the third precinct police station that was destroyed during the 2020 civil unrest, three miles from where



Persistence and perseverance with the Stamp Game

George Floyd was killed and less than three miles from where Renee Good and Alex Pretti were killed by federal law enforcement this winter.

"We stand up for the safety and integrity of our Seward families and community in several ways," said Kelly Dean, Montessori Coordinator at Seward, when asked about how they are handling the recent increased federal immigration enforcement activities.

The school has established safe routines for arrival and dismissal, practiced safety actions for responding to ICE activity in our area and helped supply basic needs like food and safe transport to families.

They have also had dozens of parents and neighbors patrolling the perimeter of their campus at every arrival and dismissal, and, according to Dean, all their guides have "chosen to keep their children who moved to online learning within their classroom community, rather than dividing and shuffling them into new ones with new

teachers."

"All of these responses required a lot of behind-the-scenes thinking, enormous amounts of extra effort and work, and a deep commitment to each other as a united front rising to the challenge," added Dean.

The school also suffered a setback in 2021 due to a district-wide restructuring effort inspired, in large part, by district-wide loss of revenue. Called the Minneapolis Public Schools Comprehensive District Design, it was approved in 2020 and implemented in the 2021-22 academic year to address racial disparities, budget deficits, and declining enrollment.

The plan included reducing the number of magnet schools, eliminating most k-8 schools and organizing them into K-5 (elementary), 6-9 (middle) and 10-12 (high) schools.

This resulted in the closure of the other magnet Montessori school, Armitage, located in southwest Minneapolis.

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olis, and required Seward to dramatically reduce enrollment and eliminate services to any students beyond the fifth-grade level, despite a major addition of nine classrooms completed in 2016 to accommodate a growing middle-school program.

“Losing our middle school hurt us a lot,” said Dean.

Prior to the change, and the loss of third-year Upper Elementary students, more 12 year-old students stayed in upper elementary classes and through middle school. Elementary classrooms were “always at full capacity,” Dean said. “Now we’re down to 20 kids in our upper elementary rooms even though technically we could go up higher.”

This year, however, the school has been allowed to keep its third-year Upper Elementary students, although, without the seventh and eighth-grade levels, some students still choose to move before sixth grade to avoid entering a new middle school a year later than most others.

Still, enrollment is growing, and there is a waiting list of those who want to enroll at the school overall.

Keys to success

Despite the challenges it has brought, Dean sees the school’s location as something that has also contributed to its survival and success.

Being in one of the city’s more densely populated and economically, culturally and racially diverse neighborhoods also helped it meet district integration goals. And being centrally located helped keep transportation costs down.

“We are often treated as a neighborhood school,” said Dean. “We have had a lot of immigrant populations coming to our school and that immigrant population has changed over the decades as the population of the neighborhood changed.”

The neighborhood has seen waves of immigrants and refugees with a

Hmong population in the 1990, followed by many families coming from Ethiopian, Oromo and Somali. “Right now,” she added “I feel like we’re in a transition with a lot of different Spanish-speaking countries.”

According to a 2023 report from Minnesota Compass, the neighborhood is made up of 52% people of color, 48% white and 26% foreign born.

When asked directly what she thinks has helped keep the school go-

the reputation of whatever somebody thinks of is Montessori. Which often, as I’ve come to learn, they think means more freedom for their children and more freedom to express themselves, like there’s less processing and more embracing of who kids are.”

Tammy Goetz, for example, was a former Montessori guide who served as principal at Seward from 2013 to 2020 when enrollment reached nearly 900 students, with 80 staff work-

Because we do so much outreach, and we’re so inclusive to our families, they tend to stay longer

ing these years, Dean is quick to offer a one word answer.

“Montessori,” she said.

When asked to expand, she credits the Montessori method itself, and how popular it is with parents.

“We have a lot of people attracted to Montessori because they think that it’s going to be a better fit for their children,” she elaborated. For some, she said, “they don’t like the idea of their kids having to sit in seats.”

The multi-age classes are also appealing to many.

“I know our Somali families often wanted to keep their children here because they love having that relationship with the teacher for three years and then they have another relationship for three years.”

The extra mile

The extra efforts of teachers and administrators are also a major part of the school’s success, according to Dean.

“Because we do so much outreach with families, and we’re so inclusive to our families and our community ... they tend to stay longer,” Dean said. “But it starts with Montessori. With

ing at the school. She helped ensure multi-ages in the Children’s House and oversaw a large addition in 2016.

Parents advocates have also made a huge difference according to Dean. She shared the story of one parent who led the efforts to get a much-needed expansion for the middle school that included a connected new building.

Dean recalls how “People were teaching in hallways and under stairs. We had corners that they put temporary partitions like they do for offices, just to block off a corner to try to give a little bit of privacy space in the hallway. One parent actually went around and she literally measured the square footage per pupil ratio in the different middle schools and then presented that to the school board. She was a key, critical piece at making it so that we got this massive expansion.”

That 2016 expansion included a new media center, lunchroom, offices, a larger main entrance and the addition of a new third floor. The district reported that between 2014 and 2023, the district has invested \$22,070,024 in

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capital expenditures for the building that is now 126,726 square feet in size, and has a design that can handle up to 900 students.

The district has also made significant investments in the school's outdoor learning environment. It features an inner courtyard, community garden, rain garden, and other planting areas where students actively participate in gardening projects.

There are currently ten Lower and seven Upper Elementary classrooms, and four Primary, or Children's House, classrooms, with enrollment of around

700 students.

"Now the school is as strong as ever," Dean said with pride, while also noting that their neighboring St. Paul district has five public Montessori schools.

"I really feel strongly," she said, "that a public education for Montessori is super necessary right now in Minneapolis."

Cam Gordon is a former Montessori teacher/guide and administrator, and the author of Together with Montessori.

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The four lights of learning

Montessori aligned with Universal Design for Learning



**MELANIE BROWN AND
KATEY DODD**

Public Montessori education is having a moment.

Across the country, programs are expanding. Families are seeking child-centered alternatives. District leaders are exploring models that support the whole child while meeting accountability demands. There is both growing interest and growing opportunity.

At the same time, there is a growing expectation: schools must demonstrate that what they do is grounded in research, aligned to evidence-based frameworks, and designed for all learners.

And this is where Montessori sometimes finds itself at a crossroads. Because while Montessori education is deeply research-aligned in practice, it is not always expressed in the language that dominates today's educational systems.

Frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and culturally responsive teaching shape how schools talk about quality, equity, and access. They influence funding, policy decisions, and program sustainability. Montessori aligns beautifully with many of these ideas. But alignment alone is not enough if we cannot name it. If Montessori is to continue growing

in public systems while maintaining its integrity, we must be able to do two things at once:

- Clearly translate Montessori practice into the language of modern research and policy.
- Continue learning from evolving frameworks that deepen and strengthen our work.

This is not about changing Montessori. It is about making Montessori visible, understood, and sustainable in the systems we are part of.

So where does UDL fit?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one of the most widely used frameworks in public education today. Developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), it is grounded in neuroscience and built on a simple idea: learner variability is the norm, not the exception.

Rather than waiting for students to struggle and then adding supports, UDL encourages educators to design learning environments from the start that offer multiple ways to:

- engage with learning
- access information
- show understanding
- practice learning

At UDL's heart is a powerful shift. When a child struggles, we first look at the design of the environment—not the child. For Montessori educators, this should feel familiar.

Follow the child

"Follow the child" is one of the most recognizable phrases in Montessori education—and one of the most misunderstood. Following the child is not simply allowing freedom. It is a disciplined, intentional act grounded in observation. It asks us to study the child carefully and then respond by ad-

justing the environment, the materials, and the learning conditions.

"To assist a child we must provide him with an environment which will enable him to develop freely," Montessori wrote. In other words, the work of the adult is design. This is where UDL offers a powerful complement. It gives us a shared, research-based language to describe what Montessorians have long practiced. We do not change the child to fit the system—we design the system to support the child. When we bring these two together, "following the child" becomes even more precise, more intentional, and more visible to those outside our classrooms.

Rethinking choice

Choice is often one of the first things people notice in a Montessori classroom. Students choose their work, move with purpose, and engage independently. It is a visible marker of Montessori practice. But choice, on its own, is not enough. Research tells us that choice increases motivation, engagement, and persistence—but only when it is meaningful and accessible. For some learners, too many options can be overwhelming. For others, the available choices may not feel reachable at all.

UDL helps us refine how we think about choice. Instead of asking, "Do students have choice?" UDL asks:

- Can all students connect to the learning in meaningful ways? (Engagement)
- Can all students access the content being presented? (Representation)
- Can all students practice and interact with the learning in supportive ways? (Practice / Action)
- Can all students show what they know in different ways?

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(Expression)

This expands Montessori's idea of choice into something more intentional. It pushes us to consider not just whether choice exists, but whether it works—for every child.

What does this look like in practice? Montessori gives us a powerful tool for answering that question: observation. Through observation, we begin to see patterns that might otherwise be missed.

Take Leo, a 10-year-old student in an upper elementary classroom. When working with Montessori math materials, he is confident and engaged. He explains his thinking clearly, persists through challenges, and demonstrates a strong understanding. But when asked to record his thinking or move into abstract notation, something shifts. He hesitates. He avoids the work. He says, “My brain forgets unless I see it.”

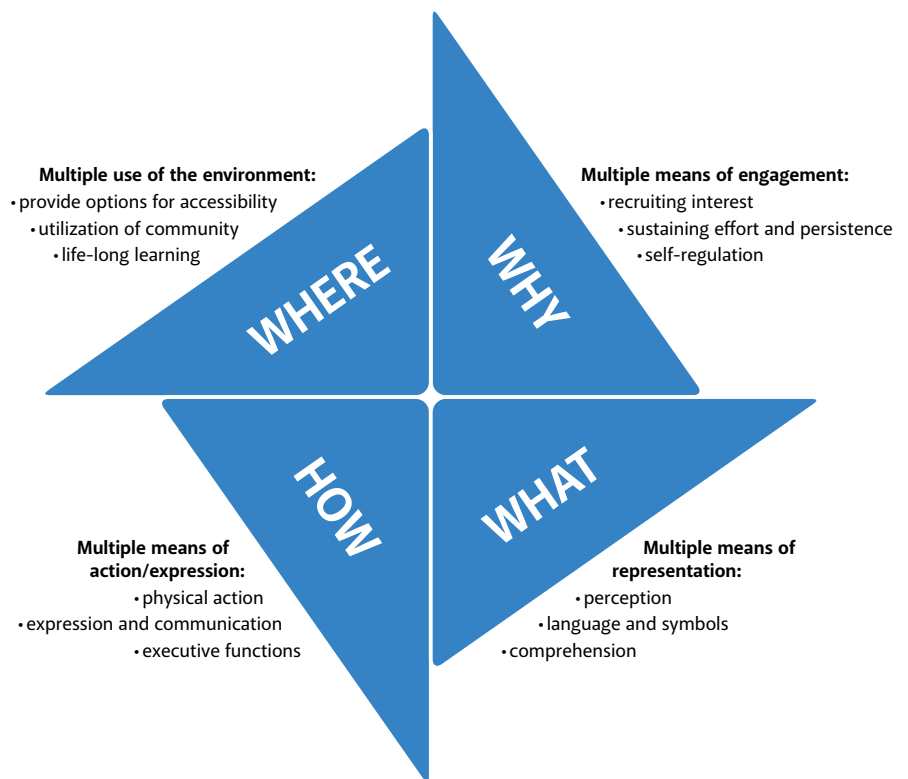
Without observation, it would be easy to misinterpret this as a lack of effort or readiness. With observation, we see something different. Leo understands the concept. The barrier is in how the learning is being represented and how he is being asked to express it. That distinction changes everything.

Instead of trying to “fix” Leo, the guide reflects on the design of the experience:

- Are there enough visual bridges between the materials and abstract symbols?
- Are there intermediate steps to support the transition?
- Does Leo have more than one way to show what they know?

Small shifts follow:

- Visual supports are added.
- Verbal explanations are encouraged before writing.
- Flexible recording options are introduced.
- Materials remain available as long as needed.



And just like that, Leo's understanding becomes visible again. This is not remediation. This is design. It is Montessori observation in action, strengthened by a UDL lens. It is also a powerful reminder: when we change the environment, we often change the outcome.

A simple way to see it

For educators looking to make this connection more visible, we often use a simple framework: the Four Lights of Learning.

- Engagement (Why): How are students connecting to the work?
- Representation (What): How are students accessing the content?
- Action & Expression (How): How are students showing what they know?
- Environment (Where): How is the space supporting—or limiting—learning?

Montessori classrooms already hold these elements. Naming them helps us refine them and helps others under-

stand them.

Why this matters

As Montessori continues to grow in public systems, this work becomes essential.

Schools are being asked to demonstrate alignment with research-based practices, inclusive design, and measurable outcomes. Montessori can meet these expectations, but we must be able to clearly communicate how.

This is advocacy. It happens when:

- A guide explains a lesson using both Montessori language and research-based terms
- A school leader connects Montessori practice to frameworks like UDL
- A program demonstrates that it is both authentic and accessible to all learners

When we do this well, Montessori is no longer seen as separate from “high-quality instruction.” It is recognized as a powerful example of it.

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Holding on while in motion

There is sometimes a concern that engaging with frameworks like UDL will dilute Montessori.

But Montessori itself was never static. It was built on observation, reflection, and a willingness to evolve in response to what children need. Engaging with research is not a departure from Montessori; it is a continuation of it. UDL does not replace Montessori. It helps us live it more fully, especially in diverse, inclusive, public settings.

Lighting the way

Montessori education has always asked us to see the child differently: to recognize potential, to trust development, and to design environments that support independence and growth. Today, we are being asked to do something more: to make that work visible in the language of modern education, and to continue strengthening it through research and reflection.

The Four Lights—Engagement, Representation, Action & Expression, and Environment—offer one way forward. They help us connect what we know with what others need to understand. And ultimately, they help us do what Montessori has always called us to do: follow the child; not just with intention, but with clarity, purpose, and a commitment to designing environments where every child can thrive.

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Building public Montessori together

Together, we're stronger than ever before



SARA SUCHMAN

With the NCMPS Public Montessori Conference just barely in the rearview mirror, I want to share some highlights for those who were not able to join us and reflections for those who were.

Gathering a national community

In April, educators, school leaders, researchers, advocates, and partners gathered in Milwaukee for the 2026 Public Montessori Conference.

Together, we represented 90 schools from 33 states and Washington, DC.

In the room were:

- **132 teachers and assistants**
- **25 Montessori coaches and level leads**
- **66 school-site administrators**
- **16 district leaders, including two superintendents**
- **23 people working alongside schools in research, policy, teacher training, advocacy, and support organizations**

Across the **131 organizations and local education agencies represented**, roughly half had attended one of our previous conferences while half were joining for the first time.

Participants traveled from across the country—from our furthest guests at Chinook Montessori in Fairbanks, Alaska, to our wonderful hosts in Milwaukee.

Across these roles and geographies was the shared experience of providing Montessori education as a public good,

using public dollars, and with public accountability. This commonality matters. Along with our awe of children and learning, it brings us together and makes this community powerful.

The state of public Montessori

The broader landscape of public Montessori helps explain both the promise and the challenge.

The Montessori Census was one of NCMPS's first projects when the organization was founded in 2012. At the time, no one knew how many public Montessori schools existed, where they were located, or what impact the movement was having nationally. It is difficult to come together when you cannot find each other!

Today, the Census has become the closest thing our field has to a shared source of truth and remains NCMPS's most cited resource by researchers, policymakers, and media.

Because of the Census, we know that there are currently **596 public Montessori schools and programs across 43 states and Washington, DC.**

Of these:

- **230 are charter schools**
- **366 are district schools**
- **Including 85 magnet programs**

Together, these schools serve just shy of 200,000 children who, taken as a whole—though not necessarily in every individual school—are majority children of color and are as likely as not to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

These schools share a national identity, but they do not all share the same access to community and support.

62 schools are located within the **12 districts nationwide that host five or more public Montessori pro-**

grams, including Milwaukee and its seven schools.

Meanwhile:

- **118 district schools are the only Montessori program in their district**
- **Almost all 230 charter schools operate as stand-alone programs**

Building and convening this national ecosystem is core to NCMPS's work. There is strength in camaraderie and power in numbers.

Why a public Montessori conference

When NCMPS launched this conference in 2022, it was not because wonderful Montessori conferences do not already exist. They do. But there was no national space designed specifically around the realities of public schools. And context matters.

When we say **public Montessori**, we mean:

- **Tuition-free access** — even when early childhood still requires creative solutions while universal pre-K continues to expand.
- **Open enrollment** — all children are welcome, and when demand exceeds seats, admissions happen by lottery or, better yet, we create more seats.
- **Public accountability** — to standards, assessments, accreditation systems, and community expectations.

We are engaged in a very particular kind of work. We are building child-centered learning environments inside public systems. We work within standards, accountability structures, transportation systems, enrollment pressures, budgets, and shifting policy

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landscapes while holding tightly to our awe of children and their agency, concentration, curiosity, and joyful flourishing.

What we experienced in Milwaukee

Friday morning, every conference participant boarded a bus and headed to one of Milwaukee Public Schools' seven Montessori schools.

Participants spent the morning visiting classrooms, talking with school teams, observing practice, and learning directly from remarkable teachers and engaged students.

The rest of the weekend continued in that same spirit.

We learned more about Milwaukee's public Montessori journey, gathered in interest groups, shared meals, explored ideas through sixteen concurrent sessions, were inspired by Jacqui Miller and Paul K. Chappell on Peace Literacy, and closed with a moving plenary led by Regina Dyson and Dr. Nicole

Evans.

Generosity, humility, and a willingness to support one another.

At a moment when public education can feel defined by uncertainty, political strain, staffing shortages, and exhaustion, Montessori classrooms continue to offer spaces where children are trusted, capable, and deeply respected.

None of this work is finished. Contexts differ. Constraints are real. And for many schools, the challenges ahead are significant.

But what was visible in Milwaukee was something worth holding onto:

A growing national community committed not to perfection, agreement, or ease but to children, education, and doing difficult work thoughtfully and together.

Thank you to Milwaukee Public Schools for hosting us so generously. Thank you to our presenters, keynote speakers, facilitators, school communities, and the small but mighty NCMPS team who made the gathering possible.

A world of public Montessori is being built. Together. By all of us.

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Culturally responsive public Montessori

Public schools have a duty to make all children feel welcome



JAZMIN CORBELL

Public Montessori classrooms exist at a unique intersection: Grounded in a philosophy that centers the child, they operate within public systems shaped by standards, policies, and community expectations. In this space, educators are asked to hold both fidelity to Montessori principles and responsiveness to the diverse communities they serve.

In my work as a public Montessori educator, and in conversations with teachers across the country, one question continues to surface: What does it look like to truly honor the child in a classroom where children's identities, histories, and lived realities are increasingly visible and complex? Montessori asks us to follow the child. Culturally responsive pedagogy asks us to see the child. Public Montessori requires us to do both.

As an educator whose own schooling experiences were shaped by culture, language, and socioeconomic difference, I am particularly attuned to the moments when children do, or do not, see themselves reflected in the classroom. This question is not theoretical. It lives in the daily work of teaching. It shows up in small, everyday moments, in what children notice, what they ask, and what they begin to make sense of about the world and their place in it.

When the curriculum meets the child

Montessori curriculum is often de-

scribed as universal, grounded in developmental theory and informed by careful observation. At the same time, public Montessori classrooms are not abstract environments. They are filled with children whose lives reflect specific cultural, linguistic, and community contexts.

Children do not enter the classroom as neutral learners. They enter as meaning-makers whose experiences shape how they interpret and engage with the environment. They notice whose names are easy for them to pronounce and whose are not. They recognize which perspectives are emphasized, and which remain unexplored or underdeveloped within the curriculum. They ask questions that do not always live neatly within the scope of a lesson, but are deeply connected to it. These moments are not outside the curriculum. They are entry points into it.

Research on public Montessori highlights ongoing tensions around equity, access, and representation, particularly for students of color navigating systems not originally designed with them in mind. In this context, the work of the Montessori educator is not to add culture to the curriculum, but to recognize that culture is already present, and to respond through deliberate, instructional decision-making that shapes how children encounter and interpret content.

Expanding, not replacing

"Education should no longer be mostly imparting of knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potentialities," Montessori wrote. Culturally relevant pedagogy, as articulated by pedagogical theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings, emphasizes academic success, cultural competence, and critical conscious-

ness. This framework has been further developed by Geneva Gay, Django Paris, and H. Samy Alim, who advocate for sustaining students' cultural and linguistic identities. In Montessori spaces, this work is sometimes framed as something external to the method. In practice, it is an expansion of what has always been present.

Respect for the child has never meant attending only to developmental needs. It requires seeing the whole child, including identity, language, family, and community context. When children feel recognized, their engagement deepens and their sense of belonging strengthens.

In practice, this often begins with noticing. It requires a level of intentionality in how we respond, what we choose to extend, and what we allow to grow within the classroom. When children feel recognized, their engagement deepens and their sense of belonging strengthens.

In my classroom, this has meant re-examining familiar materials through a broader lens. A continent study, for example, does not stop at landforms, biomes, animals, and climate. It includes layered understandings of Indigenous presence, forced migration, colonization, and the movement of people across time.

During this work, children often begin to make connections between the material and their lives, sharing stories about where their families come from or asking why certain histories are told more than others. Children are also invited to situate themselves within the human story by exploring their families' migration histories.

In this way, they continue to learn geography while developing a more

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complete understanding of the world as lived and interconnected, as well as their place within the shared fabric of humanity. This is not a shift away from Montessori. It is a movement toward greater completeness.

Seeing the prepared environment more fully

In my work with educators, I have found that culturally responsive Montessori practice becomes clearer when we shift how we see the prepared environment itself. Instead of viewing it as something fixed, it becomes something we continuously interpret and refine based on the children in front of us, with attention to how meaning is constructed through materials, language, and interaction.

Building on a framework shared by Paul K. Chappell and Jacqui Miller at the 2026 NCMPS Public Montessori Conference and Retreat, and reinterpreting it through a culturally responsive lens, I began to reconsider familiar elements of the classroom not as fixed structures, but as opportunities for expansion.

What emerged was a way of thinking about the prepared environment as something that can be developmentally aligned and culturally responsive at the same time. A lesson can be accurate, but not yet expansive in its purpose. A classroom can feel peaceful, but not yet foster a deep sense of belonging. A material can be correct, but still limited in how it invites children to connect their own experiences and identities to the content.

This shift invites educators to look more closely at the underlying elements of their classrooms. It asks us to consider how purpose, relationships, explanations, and expression are experienced by children, and whose ways of knowing are centered and which perspectives are not yet fully represented or explored within those experiences. It extends further into questions of in-

spiration, belonging, and self-worth, ensuring that children not only access the curriculum, but see themselves as valued participants within it.

In practice, this can be as simple as rethinking how a lesson is introduced, what questions are invited, or how children are encouraged to respond and make meaning. These shifts are not accidental, they are the result of intentional decisions about whose knowledge is centered and how meaning is constructed.

In this way, rigor and challenge are not removed but deepened, becoming a form of intellectual and relational vigor, as children engage in meaningful, connected work that reflects the complexity of the world around them.

Ultimately, this perspective expands peace education beyond harmony and cooperation alone. It invites a broader understanding of peace, one that includes identity and responsibility, allowing children to develop not only as learners, but as participants in an interconnected and evolving world.

A site of belonging

In Montessori, the environment teaches. The books on the shelf, the images on the wall, and the materials on the tray communicate messages about whose experiences matter.

In public Montessori classrooms, where student populations are often diverse, the prepared environment becomes a critical site for belonging. When children see their culture, languages, and family structures reflected, they experience the classroom as a place where their identities are recognized as integral to the learning environment.

In contexts where teachers have limited control over materials, this work shifts from selection to pedagogy. Teachers guide children to notice patterns, ask questions, and consider multiple perspectives within what is available. In this way, representation is

supported not only through materials, but through how children are taught to engage with them.

Montessori environments that foster emotional safety and belonging are especially important during times of uncertainty, as they provide stability and connection for children navigating complex realities.

Inquiry as the bridge

One of the most powerful tools Montessori educators have is inquiry. When children ask questions, particularly those connected to identity, fairness, or difference, the role of the teacher is not to provide conclusions, but to facilitate structured exploration grounded in observation, questioning, and evidence.

As Maria Montessori reminds us, “I feel that it is a difficult path that we are following ... This ‘someone’ who can teach us is the child. The child can reveal to us the origin of society and can show us the way out of this intricate question. Our task is to give help to the child and watch for what he will reveal to us.”

Questions such as “What do you notice?” “What are you wondering?” and “How might we learn more?” maintain a focus on learning rather than positioning and allow children to think critically while remaining grounded in observation and research. In practice, this can look like staying with a child’s question a little longer than planned, allowing space for multiple perspectives, or returning to a topic over time rather than closing it too quickly.

In public Montessori settings, where educators may feel pressure to avoid certain topics, inquiry offers a path forward. It honors the child’s curiosity while maintaining alignment with Montessori principles of self-directed learning and discovery.

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Grace and courtesy

Grace and Courtesy lessons are often the first place where culturally responsive practice becomes visible. Traditionally focused on tone, movement, and social norms, these lessons can expand to include explicit practice in navigating difference, addressing harm, and engaging in repair within community contexts. These moments often arise naturally, in small conflicts, misunderstandings, or moments of curiosity between children.

Children naturally encounter moments that require them to listen across differences, respond to mistakes, and reconsider assumptions. Community meetings create space for this work, allowing children to practice listening, disagreement, and accountability in developmentally appropriate ways.

The realities of public Montessori

Public Montessori educators operate within systems that bring both opportunity and constraint. There are standards to meet, policies to follow, and communities with differing expectations. At times, this requires careful professional judgment as educators balance responsiveness with institutional expectations.

Culturally responsive Montessori practice does not require stepping outside of these systems. Instead, it asks educators to work within them with clarity and intention. This work includes ensuring that materials reflect a range of human experiences when pos-

sible, guiding children to think critically about what they observe, creating classroom structures that support dialogue and community, and responding to children's questions with curiosity rather than avoidance.

This is not about introducing a new ideology. It is about maintaining fidelity to the child. In practice, this often looks like small, thoughtful shifts in how materials are used, how conversations are facilitated, and how children's questions are honored, rather than large-scale changes to the curriculum itself.

Preparing children for the world they inhabit

Montessori education has always been oriented toward the future. Through cosmic education, children come to understand interdependence and their place within a larger human story.

For today's children, that world is diverse, complex, and interconnected like never before. Preparing them requires more than academic knowledge. It requires the ability to see themselves as part of the human story, to understand perspectives beyond their own, to engage thoughtfully with difference, and to participate in community with responsibility and care.

Returning to the child

In conversations about curriculum, policy, and practice, it is easy to lose sight of the simplest truth: the child remains at the center. Culturally responsive Montessori practice is not about

adding something new. It is about returning to what has always been essential, a commitment to understanding the child as both a developing learner and a situated human being.

It asks educators to observe more closely, listen more carefully, and prepare environments that reflect not only developmental needs, but lived realities. In public Montessori classrooms, this work ensures that all children experience school as a place where they belong. And when children feel that sense of belonging, their capacity to engage, question, and contribute to the learning community expands in meaningful ways.

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The Montessori adolescent in transition

Helping middle school students make the leap to the next level



MICHELLE M. RAVIN

We spend years in the Montessori environment cultivating a profound respect for the rights of the child. We champion their right to independence, to self-paced exploration, and to a learning ecosystem driven by intrinsic curiosity. Within our carefully prepared micro-societies, these rights are not just philosophical ideals; they are the daily, lived reality of our students.

But a critical question emerges as these students mature: *What happens when our adolescents take the leap into a system that operates on a completely different set of rules?*

As an educator, a phenomenological researcher, and a mother who has personally navigated these stages with my own children, I have spent years observing the crossing between the “Montessori Shore” and the “High School Shore.” Moving from a small, individualized, process-driven community to a large, anonymous, product-driven institution is not merely a change of buildings; it is a profound philosophical and structural discontinuity.

If we truly believe in the rights of the child, our responsibility does not end at our classroom doors. We must advocate for their right to a supported, humanized transition.

When strength becomes friction

Through listening closely to the

lived experiences of students and families navigating this crossing, it becomes clear that adolescents face three distinct areas of “shock”:

- **Academic Shock (The Loss of Autonomy):** Students experience a jarring shift from self-paced mastery to rigid deadlines, lecture-based learning, and grade-driven assessment.
- **Social Shock (The Anonymous Institution):** Adolescents leave a close-knit micro-society where every student is known, entering a complex macro-school governed by rigid new social hierarchies.
- **Philosophical Shock (The Clash of Motivations):** Montessori-honed superpowers—*intrinsic motivation, deep questioning, and self-pacing*—can act as a double-edged sword in a system not designed to accommodate them.

In a traditional system not designed to accommodate them, the very superpowers our students have honed—*independence, self-advocacy, and deep questioning*—often act as a double-edged sword. As one adolescent participant in my research powerfully articulated, “I used to ask questions all the time. Then I learned when not to.”

Another noted, “It felt like school stopped being about learning and started being about proving.”

These voices highlight a critical vulnerability. Without deliberate support, the transition threatens their right to authentic intellectual engagement, forcing them to assimilate rather than integrate.

Transition theory in action

To safeguard the rights of the transitioning adolescent, we must build a bridge that honors their strengths rather than asking them to simply as-

similate. Educator and author Nancy Schlossberg developed her Transition Theory model to understand how individuals experience and cope with change and transition. We can scaffold this leap from middle school to high school using the four foundational pillars (the “4 S’s”) of the model:

- **Navigating the “Situation”:** We cannot change the structural realities of the receiving high school. However, we can help adolescents reclaim their agency by finding small areas of choice—whether through electives or independent research—to maintain their “Inner Pilot”.
- **Protecting the “Self”:** We must explicitly teach students that their Montessori “Self”—their curiosity and independence—is their greatest asset, even if it is not immediately graded. Reminding them that grades often reflect procedural fluency, not actual intelligence, ensures their self-esteem remains intact.
- **Building Robust “Support”:** A successful transition requires humanizing systems. We must implement advisory models so every transfer has at least one “human lighthouse” who knows their name, and help students find “Social Sanctuaries” (like clubs or sports teams) that replicate the scale of their Montessori roots.
- **Explicit “Strategies”:** We must actively teach the skills required to navigate the hidden curriculum. This means providing explicit instruction on traditional survival mechanisms: navigating grading portals, adopting traditional note-taking formats, and studying for standardized tests.

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Equipping the builders

A blueprint requires skilled builders. To support this leap, the adults in the microsystem must evolve their roles from *Directors*—managing schedules and controlling the Montessori ecosystem—to *Consultants*. As consultants, we empower self-advocacy, provide emotional scaffolding, and proactively mesh the family, the sending guide, and the receiving school before a crisis hits.

Honoring the rights of the child means recognizing that we are not merely preparing students to survive within our own walls. We are equipping them with the resilience, the

self-advocacy, and the intrinsic fire to cross into any environment—and flourish. Ensuring our students can bridge this gap with their curiosity and confidence intact is at the very heart of our mission.

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Montessori, the Black child, and culture

Creativity and culture at the core of the Black Montessori experience



AYIZE SABATER
WITH **MOLEFI KETE ASANTE**
AND **NAH DOVE**

Kuumba! This article delves into the intersection of Montessori, the Black child, and culture. Many points here will relate to children of other ethnicities given that culture encompass human development components. As a Black father I am speaking authentically to my own lived experiences. I open with the word “Kuumba!” because this concept gets to some core aspects of Black culture. Here, we ask how culture relates to Montessori pedagogy in service of #TheBlackChild’s learning as well as learning for other children?

“Kuumba” is a Kiswahili concept translated as “creativity.” It is the 6th principle of the Nguzo Saba—the 7 principles of the African American cultural holiday, Kwanzaa. For me this concept gets to some core aspects of the Black culture. Creativity can be seen in how many Black people operate in key life areas. For example, dance (my mind goes to Michael Jackson’s Motown 25 performance of *Billie Jean*); dress (remember Serena Williams’ Wakanda or Tutu tennis match outfits); literature (Nikki Giovanni’s *Ego Tripping* or James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*); and inventions (Garrett Morgan’s traffic signal or Marie Van Brittan Brown’s home surveillance device) are just a few of Black people’s

creative expressions.

In an earlier article (*Montessori and the Black child: “Certainly, we must go”*, AMI-USA Journal Fall 2022), I presented a “back of the napkin” reflection on three aspects of Montessori pedagogy which align with the learning disposition of many Black children.

I wrote about three concepts (self-initiative, independence, and spirituality) at the intersection of Montessori pedagogy and the learning style of many Black children. However, not only did I leave out kuumba, I also did not touch on culture. To talk further on that subject, I turn to renowned Black thinker and “father of Afrocentricity” Dr. Molefi Kete Asante.

Dr. Asante’s perspective: culture in the Montessori school classroom

A Montessori outsider can see that the Montessori method is grounded in the principles of engaging all the child’s senses. It uses the entire environment of the classroom, deep concentration on practical activities, self-discipline, and teacher facilitation, in the making of independent and responsible adults.

The Montessori experience allows schools to adapt their methods to a variety of regions and cultures. In the Montessori method, culture can be a way to use children’s customs, traditions, social institutions, achievements, and histories as curricular components. Everything in the classroom and everything in the students’ minds are parts of the total experience of cultural learning.

Teachers of African and African-American children should have some understanding of the broad outlines of Black culture. We asked a teacher in an urban school where the student population was 80 percent

African-Americans, “do you know Langston Hughes?” The teacher looked puzzled, and said, “I think he is the fellow who works as a valet at the local restaurant.” It was not the answer we were looking for—Langston Hughes one of the greatest names in African American literature! What prepares a teacher who is limited in information about African-American culture to teach African-American students, regardless of their numbers? The teacher as facilitator must also be a person of empathy, affect and respect for all cultures.

There are three basic assumptions about schools and culture:

- Education is fundamentally a social phenomenon. This means it has a socializing effect.
- Schools prepare students to live in society. This means it is preparatory for adulthood.
- Societies develop schools suitable to their cultures. This means schools are training spaces for self-discipline.

Why is culture important?

Culture is like a digital clock and GPS; it will let you know what time it is, where you are located, and where you can go. Students should always feel centered, that is, comfortable in the cultural zone closest to them and their families. Should they go outside their culture, there must be sufficient appreciation for cultural differences. Without this understanding students may be unwittingly submerged in cultures that do not like them, distort their histories, and show them as inferior to others.

Students relate to lessons that include cultural content from their histo-

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ries. They are interested in the lessons because the lessons are interested in them. Students can re-live experiences they have learned from their families when culture is respected in the classroom. Odd things told and learned in families become a part of the environment in the classroom. Students appreciate the value of other students' cultures when they recognize that all people have some cultural origin, values, customs, and traditions. A mutual understanding of other cultures is the platform for convergence of ideas, values, and meanings.

Why must the teacher facilitate respect for culture?

The teacher must learn as much as possible about the cultures of students to fill in gaps through information intervention, asking questions to students and other facilitators about specific cultures, and allowing students to bring cultural examples to class, if possible.

Why is cultural education important to a child's development?

First, it provides the child with a natural response to information, concepts, and ideas. Second, it builds trust between the teacher and the child. Third, culture is the source of confidence and independence, where a child can exhibit habits of leadership and accountability. Finally, for those that say they "don't see race" they often fall into the pitfall of attempting to be non-cultural. Being non-cultural in a western-culture-based world really means being Eurocentric. So, to "not see color" or "not see culture" is to capitulate to the surrounding White domination and Eurocentricity of the surrounding society. Dr. Beverly Tatum uses the analogy of a moving walkway—just standing still is not neutral.

Dr. Montessori described culture as the sum total of accumulated human knowledge and important to one's

growth. In *To Educate the Human Potential*, she says "If during this [developmental] period of social interest and mental acuteness all possibilities of culture are offered to the child, to widen his outlook and ideas of the world, this organization will be ... used for purposes of social organization at a later stage.

Therefore, in working with Black children, as well as with children in general, I would suggest that we celebrate their culture as opposed to attempt to "not see it." Consider incorporating symbols, images and artifacts from their culture in the environment. Avoid "minoritizing" children in how we think and talk about them. Montessori for Social Justice has urged us to shift to "people of the global majority" as opposed to "minority." Instead of "othering" children of the global majority, we can help them to feel a sense of belonging, that they are valued community members and to understand that we are all members of one human race, as Dr. Dove points out, with more in common than different.

Dr. Sabater responds:

This discussion of culture, and how Montessori pedagogy, used in service of #TheBlackChild's learning, as well as the learning of children from other cultures, is a conversation that is occurring more and more frequently. As visionary efforts like #MontessoriForSocialJustice, #BlackWildflowers and #BlackMontessoriEducationFund become more and more successful. With their success, more and more Black people, and people of the global majority, will be #TouchedByMontessori. And if #BlackMontessori is to succeed then it will have to effectively lean into much of what Dr. Asante has just discussed as important components of culture.

Efforts like Poinciana, where Drs. Dove and Asante visited, are self-professed "Afrocentric Montessori" programs. Poinciana, for example, prominently portrays images reflective of

the majority of Black children's culture. Their library curates books that specialize in Black history, and they offer specifically relevant learning materials.

We hope this brief discussion of "how culture relates to Montessori pedagogy in service of #TheBlackChild's learning" sparks further investigation into this fascinating arena. Particularly, as increasing numbers of Black families seek Montessori education for their children, it warrants rigorous exploration around how Black children perform there, and how their respective Montessori programs engage the children's culture. Maybe the world will see more "Kuumba" as more Montessori programs engage with the culture of their respective Black students.

Ayize Sabater, EdD, is the Director of Innovation & Advancement with the Black Montessori Education Fund.

Molefi Kete Asante, PhD, known as the "Father of Afrocentricity," is the President of the MKA Institute and a professor in the Department of Africology and African American studies at Temple University

Nah Dove, PhD, is a Temple University Africology professor, scholar and co-author of Being Human Being.

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Human needs and the needs of humanity

Informing cosmic education with Ethnic Studies



SOVANDARA CHHIN

“Para todos los niños,” read a sign displayed at the entrance of the exhibit at the Museum of Tolerance. “For all children.”

Something about this exhibit caught my eye: *Mendez vs. Westminster Board of Education*, 1947. Was this Westminster in Orange County, Calif.? This moment, in a Southern Californian museum at the age of 35, was when I first learned about the truth-telling of Sylvia Mendez. At age eight, Mendez was the center of a civil rights case that set a precedent for the end of school segregation in America—eight years before *Brown v. Board of Education*. Why did I not learn about this particular local California history in school? Why was this story silenced?

Almost two decades after *Mendez v. Westminster*, a multi-racial coalition of student-activists called the Third World Liberation Front demanded that UC Berkeley respond to the lack of professors of color and the lack of academic programs now known as Ethnic Studies. This discipline would come to focus on the histories and issues of marginalized communities: Black, Chicano, Asian, and Indigenous. Also during this period, Montessori education had a revival in the United States. Nancy McCormick Rambush, first as Mario Montessori’s representative for the Association Montessori International (AMI) and then as founder of the American Montessori Society (AMS),

was an early and influential leader in the movement to open new Montessori schools and teacher training centers across the United States under the directorship of Mario Montessori.

This period of Montessori revitalization aligned with the broader social change of the Civil Rights Movement: independence, liberation, respect for the child, and peace education. The rapidly growing Montessori education movement was shaped by social change, education reform, and the increased demand for child-centered learning.

Ethnic studies and Montessori

So where does Ethnic Studies fit into the Montessori canon?

Cosmic Education offers a powerful lens for social studies by teaching that everything in the universe is interconnected and that each human has a purpose in contributing to the harmony of the global community. Introduced through the “Great Lessons,” these stories about the universe, Earth, life, humans, and communication integrate science, social studies, reading, and writing to foster responsibility, empathy, and a deeper understanding of one’s place in the world.

Students begin to see themselves as active participants in a complex world, capable of applying their knowledge to real-world contexts as thoughtful, engaged citizens.

But, within Cosmic Education, how do students see their identities, cultures, and families reflected with dignity and complexity in the classroom? What opportunities do students have to explore who they are and who they are becoming?

Asking myself these reflective questions ensures that I am cultivating a

beloved, peaceful community—a space where students are physically, psychologically and emotionally safe, so they can take safe risks and grow and develop to their fullest potential. “The Great Lessons” embody these values as they inspire curiosity and capture the vastness of the universe. Children can understand that they are specks of star dust interconnected with everything around them.

The Five Great Lessons are:

- Coming of the Universe and the Earth
- Coming of Life
- Coming of Human Beings
- Communications in Signs
- The Story of Number

Third Great lesson, Coming of Human Beings, pertains the most to Ethnic Studies. This lesson is also known as the “The Story of Humans,” and includes the four disciplines of social studies: civics and government, economics, geography and history. The lesson tells the story of how early humans and ancient civilizations began to shape the world through culture. Humans are storytelling, thinking beings with gifts of reason and imagination, hands for creation, language to share culture, and cooperation to work together in harmony to meet their needs and build communities.

These gifts allowed humans not just to survive, but to thrive and build for future generations. This lesson opens the door to studies in early human societies and cultures, the fundamental needs of humans, the historical development of tools, inventions, and problem-solving; and how humans began to come together and form societies through the use of writing, storytelling and cultural expression.

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Overall the lesson is not about humans being the strongest or the fastest species alive, but about how, with intelligence, creativity, and cooperation, humans can come together to contribute to the harmony of the greater world.

From conception to practice

So what lessons in my album can I adapt with Ethnic Studies in mind? The sequence of the Third Great Lesson moves through “who are humans?,” “what do humans need?,” and “how do humans meet these needs across time and place?”

This structure helps students see both the humanity and diversity of every human. Christine E. Sleeter and Miguel Zavala, in their book *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Research*, identify six Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies, including Curriculum as Counter-Narrative and Reclaiming Cultural Identities. I focused on these two concepts as I presented The Story of Humans and the Fundamental Needs of Humans.

Reclaiming cultural identities

I begin every school year with the thematic unit, “All About Me.” This unit covers character traits and physical traits, but goes deeper than that. It begins with the study of the mind. Students learn about the parts of the brain and its functions. They also identify ways to practice mindfulness by developing emotional regulation skills, stress management, self-control, and self-motivation in setting and achieving goals. In addition, students will learn about the benefits of having a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset.

Students then learn about their bodies. In addition to learning the anatomy and physiology of the body and its systems, they will also learn what their body needs as it relates to health and hygiene, and safety. They will begin to identify their physical character traits,

interests, and racial/cultural identity so that they know and appreciate who they are and can talk about themselves positively. They will also begin to identify some of their group identities.

The last part of the unit focuses on the heart. Here, students learn about how to develop their relationship skills by building relationships with diverse individuals and groups, communicating clearly, working cooperatively, resolving conflicts, and seeking help. Students will be able to discuss and embrace sameness and differences.

Students will apply a growth mindset to understand and ask questions about differences, including interests, abilities, race, language, gender, and family traditions. Through these diverse perspective experiences, they develop social awareness, perspective-taking, empathy, respecting diversity, understanding social and ethical norms of behavior, and recognizing family, school, and community support.

Beginning with students’ cultural wealth by centering students’ cultural identities is vital in Ethnic Studies. Honoring the names, languages, and communities that the students come with humanizes each student. This approach challenges the dominant, Eurocentric narratives of who are considered “Americans” or “immigrants.” In addition, learning about the history and contributions of their ancestors creates space for critical hope that the entry point of student learning begins with their family and community histories.

Counter-narratives

By the end of the first trimester or quarter, I expand the “All About Me” unit to “All About Us.” In this unit, students delve into the Fundamental Needs of Humans chart.

Going beyond Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which is limited to individual or personal needs, the Fundamental Needs of Humans chart includes

material needs, such as shelter, food, clothing, transportation, safety, and communication. It also includes the spiritual needs of love, spirituality or religion, culture, and beauty.

The Fundamental Needs of Human chart also goes beyond material needs and includes what a community needs to be culturally sustaining. The chart reflects the collective thinking of the students in my class. For example, when asked what they all need, my students’ initial response included the need to follow the rules and follow directions. This falls under the need for safety and governance.

Some students then go further and say that they need to have no poverty and equal rights. Using a T-Chart to document children’s thinking about what is considered wants or needs is a way to spotlight the fact that students bring in a wealth of knowledge to the classroom community space.

In this unit, students begin to define themselves within the greater communities that they inhabit, develop criticality of local history from the perspective of people of color, and begin to rewrite their collective narrative that has been oppressed and suppressed by racism or colonialism.

Counter-narratives are narratives opposed to the dominant, Eurocentric narratives. They are stories of people of color who have been oppressed by racism and/or colonization that provide historical perspectives, interpretations, and criticality. This criticality, through counter-narratives in epistemology, in indigenous knowledge, and through traditions before European colonization, is a way to liberate and reclaim cultural and racial identity from oppression.

Liberatory education

Storytelling is a way to shine a light on issues and experiences some people

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might not be aware of. Truth telling is a way to share injustices and start to work towards rectifying those injustices. Liberatory education is a way to position students as intellectuals and leaders of their own learning by guiding them to increase their ability to actively increase their funds of knowledge.

As Maria Montessori stated in *The Discovery of the Child*, “The concept of liberty which should inspire teaching is, on the other hand, universal: it is the liberation of a life repressed by an infinite number of obstacles which oppose harmonious development, both physical and spiritual.”

With this in mind, I must ensure a space within my classroom so that my students can develop to their fullest human potential by combating exoticism,

tokenism, or other means of coloniality. Cultural food, flags, and festivals are all great places to begin to appreciate and validate communities of color, as it is a culturally responsive practice. However, delving more deeply into social justice issues of race, food, power, access, environment, and climate provide students with the opportunity to develop critical hope and a more just future.

Our fundamental human needs unite us. Our collective stories began with our human origins and extend to the present time.

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Innovation schools for Montessori flexibility

The model offers great power and calls for great responsibility



MATT MATERA AND JULIA WEBB

What is the vision for Montessori in the Public Sector?

The Montessori model is rooted in an understanding of human development in which children grow, thrive, flourish, and learn in a specifically prepared environment, guided by adults trained to implement the method.

Montessori outcomes for children in executive function, academic achievement, literacy, love of learning, and general well-being are well-established. But to achieve these outcomes, Montessori schools need the sustained flexibility to implement their curriculum, teacher preparation, and educational approach.

Flexibility to implement with fidelity enables success and increases each school's control of its own destiny. The most effective Montessori holds to the model, with mixed-aged classrooms, materials in the environment, and trained staff.

Without the flexibility to make choices about its structure, a school may be limited in its ability to be true to the Montessori model. Without the flexibility to train educators, use Montessori materials and curriculum, and structure multi-age environments, schools wrestle with the question of when a Montessori school stops being a Montessori school. And without full implementation, schools won't be able to realize the outcomes research shows are possible.

District public Montessori schools can experience all-too-frequent changes within their districts. Shifts in superintendent, board members, central office staff, and district policy can affect schools' ability to consistently implement Montessori with fidelity.

Maybe a district releases a new staffing model that deprives a school of a key Montessori-certified teacher. Maybe a new common schedule, shifting curricular mandates, required professional development, or other district expectations don't support effective Montessori implementation. Throughout the country, schools are faced with a series of external pressures and expectations that press against the core of their work implementing Montessori.

Some adaptation is necessary for public Montessori schools, which must operate consistently with state law and state expectations. But the immediacy and breadth of potential district limitations on a school's flexibility can make it hard for schools to stay true to the Montessori model and thrive.

So how do public Montessori schools ensure they can implement true Montessori models? Right now, most schools operate somewhere on a continuum.

"Innovation School" is an emerging model that can mean different things in different states. Here we use the term broadly to refer to district schools that remain responsible for meeting district goals but have negotiated protected flexibility to implement their individualized models. They are typically district public schools supervised by a partner nonprofit with expanded and protected flexibilities allowing schools to make decisions about staffing, budget, scheduling, and curriculum.

There can be successful schools in each of those categories, but it is easier

to implement with fidelity and to practice continuous improvement if you have more concrete flexibility protections. And with those protections has to come great responsibility for outcomes.

What expectations should come with guaranteed flexibility?

Flexibility requires that schools hold themselves accountable to student outcomes. Schools must demonstrate that a fully implemented Montessori model leads to student success. With the district or authorizer, schools need to articulate clear outcome goals for a high-quality Montessori education.

Schools must consider the measures for academic achievement, of course, but also executive function, independence and engagement, social and emotional wellbeing, active citizenship, alumni success, and more. How will your school measure the academic growth and success of its learners both in terms of the Montessori curriculum and more traditional standards-based measures? How will you demonstrate the growth of the whole child and their ability to care for themselves and others? How will you provide data on how your learners care for their community and are agents of peace and justice? How will you help your district or authorizers understand the value of Montessori education through concrete measures of student success?

Elm City Montessori School, in New Haven, Connecticut, is a unique model of charter school with Innovation School flexibility. It is the only district-authorized charter in the state—the 19 other programs are authorized by the State Board of Education. Its teach-

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No Special Flexibility	Informal Flexibility	Policy Flexibility	Innovation School
District sets policy for Montessori school just like any other school	Based on relationships/history, Montessori school may get flexibility in some areas	Superintendent or district board has formalized idea that a Montessori school has flexibility in some areas	Formal, defined flexibility in key areas in exchange for meeting district goals

ers are district employees, and its students are district students. The school reached agreement with the district and the state under which it has an independent board and is responsible to the New Haven School District and the State of Connecticut for meeting ambitious performance goals.

- **Calendar and Schedule:** the school sets its own calendar and schedule and can adapt them to the needs of Montessori education
- **Curriculum:** the school has the ability to implement a full Montessori curriculum
- **Staffing:** the principal is hired by the independent board and all teachers (who are unionized employees of the school district) are selected by the school. Through an agreement with the district’s union, the school pays teachers about ten percent more than other city teachers in exchange for items including a slightly longer school day
- **Budget:** using the resources generated by students enrolled on the campus, the school has the flexibility to spend this revenue as best needed to support school operations

The operation of the school in these ways has led to great results for students:

- Increased achievement for students on internal Montessori-based and standardized assessments
- Stronger metrics for social and

emotional wellbeing for students

- Increase student attendance and belonging
- Retention of students from Primary into Erdkinder/Middle School
- Retention of staff
- Pathways and Learning Communities for Assistants and Guides

Similar structures can support other schools that operate as Innovation Schools. The process for becoming an Innovation School varies from state to state, but the key document creating an Innovation School is a contract between the school district and a partner nonprofit. Innovation Schools feature:

- Defined flexibility where the schools can make decisions about programming and continually improve
- A performance contract where the school is responsible for meeting goals set in partnership with the district
- Empowered educators who are invested in the mission of the school
- A community partnership nonprofit that provides consistency and helps make sure the school is meeting its goals

These structures allow for faithful, thoughtful Montessori education in schools that are also vibrant, crucial parts of their districts. There is **great power**—the flexibility to implement a school that meets community needs consistent with Montessori principles—and **great responsibility**—the

need to meet ambitious, holistic performance goals set in partnership with the school district. Like the child focused on the balancing walk along the ellipse, or the older learner using the Racks and Tubes for Long Division, schools with flexibility and autonomy are allowed the concentration to work toward their continuous improvement. With the obstacles removed, schools can focus on the sustainability and fidelity of the Montessori learning that our children deserve.

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Implementation science, Montessori style

We combined a research-backed model with Montessori principles



EMILY MADISON

When my state mandated that all public schools adopt an early literacy curriculum from a narrow, state-approved list, the Montessori community faced a familiar crossroads. How do we honor our pedagogical roots while navigating the rigid requirements of a public school system?

The four Montessori elementary schools in our large urban school district met this challenge head-on. In collaboration with my nonprofit, Montessori Collective, we facilitated this integration by blending three frameworks: Implementation Science, the Lippitt-Knoster Model for Managing Complex Change, and Montessori's Human Tendencies.

This process can serve as a template for any complex, system-wide change, whether you are implementing a new System of Justness, aligning Montessori curriculum with district mandates, piloting a new coaching model, expanding to a new campus, or any other system-wide change.

Getting started with Implementation Science

Implementation Science originated in the medical field to close the “know-do gap”—the space between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Recently, it has become a vital tool in education.

Success begins with an Implementation Team. This group makes

key decisions and serves as a bridge to the larger community. It is essential that members possess both deep content knowledge and strong peer relationships. Our team included one representative from each school, with specific expertise in early literacy and biliteracy.

The team's first task is to define the core philosophy and identify the necessity for change. In our case, the data was the catalyst. The number of students reading at or above grade level in our Montessori schools was well below the district goal.

We grounded our shift toward the Science of Reading in equity, asserting that we have a responsibility to provide every student with high-impact instruction. We concluded that these practices, using the *Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) Skills* curriculum as a guide, could be integrated into Montessori environments without sacrificing our pedagogy or philosophy.

Identifying key ingredients

The team's next task was to identify the Key Ingredients, the non-negotiable components of the new practice. For us, these included:

- Continued use of Montessori materials.
- Alignment with Montessori pedagogy (individualized and small-group instruction).
- Adherence to the CKLA Phonics Sequence and use of Decodable Readers

Clarity is the antidote to confusion. We established a common definition for each Key Ingredient. For example, using the “CKLA Phonics Sequence” meant children were explicitly taught sounds and spelling patterns in a specific order, but used Montessori materials for instruction and practice, and

children progressed through the sequence at their own pace.

The Fidelity Assessment

To measure if we were doing what we said we would do, we developed a Fidelity Assessment. This included walkthrough tools and record-keeping systems to ensure the Key Ingredients were being implemented according to our shared definitions.

With the technical framework in place based on Implementation Science, we consulted the Lippitt-Knoster Model for Managing Complex Change for additional guidance. This model identifies five essential components required for successful change: Vision, Skills, Motivation, Resources, and an Action Plan. If even one element is missing, the change initiative risks failure:

- Missing vision leads to confusion: “*Why are we doing this?*”
- Missing skills results in anxiety: “*I’m being asked to do this new thing, but I don’t know how. What happens if I can’t figure it out?*”
- Missing motivation creates resistance: “*This is a waste of time. The old way of doing things worked just fine.*”
- Missing resources produces frustration: “*I’m being asked to do this new thing, but I don’t have all the materials I need. How am I supposed to make it happen when I’m not provided with what I need?*”
- Missing action plan leads to false starts: “*We keep trying to make this change, but it never seems to stick.*”

While Implementation Science helps us form the vision, we turned to Montessori's Human Tendencies to fuel motivation. Because our work as

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Montessorians is deeply human, we prioritized these six tendencies during the transition:

- **Orientation:** Understanding one's role in the bigger picture.
- **Order:** Making sense of the new physical and social environment.
- **Exploration:** Encouraging curiosity about the new curriculum.
- **Communication:** The need to understand and be understood.
- **Exactness:** Finding satisfaction in completing the new tasks well.
- **Self-Perfection:** Fostering self-termination in the new process.

We addressed the skills gap through responsive coaching and by using district professional development days for targeted learning. To provide the necessary resources, we designed a custom Scope and Sequence document that aligned CKLA skills to Montessori lessons, created record-keeping systems, and developed new Montessori works for every phonics skill in the curriculum.

Finally, we built a rigorous action plan detailing twice-monthly team meetings, principal check-ins, and a schedule for observations using our fidelity assessment.

Initial implementation

We moved from planning to action using PDSA cycles (Plan, Do, Study, Act). The Planning phase was complete, and we used our action plan to begin the Do phase. The "Study" phase is where many schools falter; they look at student outcome data too early. If the data hasn't moved, is it because the method failed, or because it wasn't actually implemented?

By using our fidelity assessment, we could see where the Key Ingredients were missing. If a classroom struggled, we asked: "Is this a skill gap? A resource gap?"

We then acted by providing the specific support needed.

Full implementation

Once the fidelity assessment data showed that the Science of Reading was being practiced widely and authentically, we turned our eyes to the student data.

The results were transformative. Thanks to the dedication of our teachers and leaders, the Montessori schools saw an increase of 21 percentage points in students reading at or above grade level on DIBELS. By integrating Im-

plementation Science with Montessori principles, we found that systemic change can support, rather than compromise, our Montessori philosophy and pedagogy.

Explore more about active implementation at implementation.fpg.unc.edu.

Emily Madison is the Executive Director of the Montessori Collective (montessori-collective.org).

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Understanding children, not labeling them

Preparing Montessori teachers for children with learning differences



**AMY CUSHNER AND
JOYCE PICKERING**

Educator Elizabeth Stone once wrote that having a child is “to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”

When children are hurt, there is a visible call to action—a scraped knee, a fever, a fall from the monkey bars. But what if the hurt is invisible? What if the struggle lives quietly beneath the surface, only revealing itself over time through frustration, avoidance, or a slow fading of confidence?

This is the path of a child with a learning difference.

A constitutional learning difference is not about intelligence, motivation, or effort. These are children with average to above-average ability whose brains process information differently. When exposed to traditional methods of instruction, they are at risk—not because they won’t learn, but because, in key moments, they truly can’t access learning in the expected way.

And that distinction changes everything.

Seeing the invisible

Learning differences affect approximately one in five individuals. Dyslexia, ADHD, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and oral language disorders are among the most common. Yet unlike a visible injury, these differences require a

trained eye to detect. They live in the subtle, often misunderstood spaces of development—what we call the “soft signs.”

Dr. Sylvia Richardson, a pioneer in the field of learning differences, gave us a simple and powerful framework for early identification. She urged educators and parents to observe five critical areas of development:

- Coordination
- Language
- Attention
- Perception
- Social-Emotional

These areas are not arbitrary. They reflect the underlying neurological systems responsible for learning. When there are delays or inefficiencies in any one of them, a child may begin to struggle long before formal academics even begin.

The good news? These signs are observable early. The better news? When we act early, we can change everything.

Let’s move beyond awareness and into understanding. What does it actually look like when a child is struggling in one of these domains?

Coordination

A child with coordination challenges may appear clumsy, avoid physical tasks, or struggle with balance and spatial awareness. You might notice difficulty with tasks that require core strength or bilateral coordination—pouring, buttoning, or carrying materials with control.

In a Montessori environment, this shows up in Practical Life. A child who avoids these foundational activities is not simply disinterested—they may be telling us something about how their body is organizing movement.

Language (oral and written)

Language is layered. Some children struggle with articulation or word retrieval—they know what they want to say but cannot access it efficiently. Others may have difficulty understanding language, following multi-step directions, or expressing themselves clearly.

As written language emerges, additional signs may appear: weak phonological awareness, difficulty matching sounds to symbols, inconsistent memory for letter-sound relationships, and painfully slow progress.

But slow progress is not a pacing issue, it’s a processing issue.

Attention

Attention is not simply about sitting still. It is deeply connected to executive functioning—the brain’s ability to plan, initiate, sustain, and complete tasks. Some children are inattentive. Others are hyperactive. Many are both. You may notice a stark contrast between preferred and non-preferred tasks, or a child who appears capable one moment and completely shut down the next. This is not inconsistency. It is neurochemistry at work—dopamine and serotonin influencing engagement, motivation, and regulation.

Perception

Perception is how the brain interprets what it sees and hears. A child may have intact vision and hearing, yet struggle to make sense of that input. In Montessori classrooms, perception is revealed beautifully through Sensorial work. Difficulties may appear in visual discrimination, auditory processing, or spatial relationships. Fine motor and gross motor integration may also be impacted. If the brain cannot accurately

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ly process input, output will always be compromised.

Social-emotional

Perhaps the most misunderstood area, social-emotional development includes the ability to read nonverbal cues, engage in reciprocal interactions, label emotions, and form secure attachments. A child may seem withdrawn, overly reactive, or socially out of sync. These are not character flaws. They are developmental signals. And they matter, because a child's emotional experience is deeply tied to their ability to learn.

Observation: the beginning of everything

Here's the shift: recognizing these signs is not about labeling children. It is about *understanding them*. Observation is not passive. It is a trained, intentional act. In Montessori education, we often say the teacher is a scientist of the child. This is where that becomes real. Through careful observation, we begin to see patterns:

- Where does the child struggle?
- When do they disengage?
- What tasks do they avoid or over-rely on?
- How do they respond to challenges?

Observation allows us to move from assumption to insight. It also allows us to do something even more powerful: match the lesson to the child.

The mindset shift: From won't to can't to can

This is the heart of the work. Too often, children with learning differences are misunderstood. Their struggles are labeled as laziness, defiance, or lack of motivation.

"He just won't do it."

"She's not trying."

"They could if they wanted to."

But what if we paused and asked a different question? What if it's not *won't*? What if it's *can't*? This is not semantics. This is neuroscience.

When we shift from "won't" to "can't," we move from judgment to curiosity. We begin to ask:

- What is getting in the way?
- What skill is missing?
- What support is needed?

And from there, we build toward the most important word of all: *can*. With the right intervention, the right instruction, and the right mindset, children *can* access learning. They *can* build skills. They *can* experience success.

But they cannot do it alone — and they cannot do it if we misread the problem.

The Montessori advantage

Montessori education offers a unique and powerful framework for supporting children with learning differences. Why? Because it is built on observation. On individualized instruction. On meeting the child where they are—not where we expect them to be.

The prepared environment allows for:

- Movement and hands-on learning
- Repetition without stigma
- Multi-sensory engagement
- Self-paced progression

But here's the truth: the environment alone is not enough. The adult matters. Our clarion call is to support teachers. Teachers need access to knowledge and therapeutic strategies. When the teacher becomes the "prepared adult," they can recognize when a child needs more than exposure—they need intervention. They step in with intention, offering direct teaching of underlying skills while preserving the dignity and independence of the child. They do not wait for failure. They respond to early signs.

What intervention really looks like

Intervention is not a separate event that happens outside the classroom. It is woven into the fabric of daily learning.

It looks like:

- Breaking skills into smaller, teachable components
- Providing explicit, direct instruction where needed
- Using multi-sensory strategies to reinforce learning
- Increasing teacher presence during moments of challenge
- Adjusting expectations without lowering standards

It also looks like a partnership. Parents, teachers, & school administration working together. Sharing observations. Using checklists. Communicating openly about what is being seen and what is being tried. Intervention is not about fixing a child. It is about removing barriers.

The time is now

We have known for over a century that early identification changes outcomes. The research is clear. The tools are available. The path is visible.

And yet, too often, we wait. We wait for a child to "catch up." We wait for clearer signs. We wait for failure to make the need undeniable.

But children cannot afford for us to wait. The developmental window from birth to age six is a period of extraordinary brain growth. It is also the time when intervention is most effective. We are not powerless in this process. We are stewards of it. The path is clear: *Prepare. Observe. Intervene.*

The child can

When we begin to see differently, we begin to act differently. When we act differently, children experience

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something they may not have felt before: Success. Not the kind that comes easily — but the kind that is built, step by step, through understanding, effort, and support. A child who once avoided work begins to engage. A child who struggled to express themselves finds their voice. A child who felt “less than” begins to feel capable.

This is the shift from *can't* to *can*. And it is not a small shift. It is life-changing. We are not just teaching reading, writing, or math. We are shaping how children see themselves as learners. So the next time a child hesitates, resists, or struggles, pause. Look closer. Listen differently. Because beneath that moment may be something invisible —

and incredibly important. And when we see it, truly see it, we hold the power to change not just a lesson, but a life trajectory.

The child *can*.

And it begins with us.

Amy Cushner is the President and Founder at AC Education Services.

Joyce Pickering is the Executive Director, Emerita of the June Shelton School and Evaluation Center and the co-author with Sylvia O. Richardson of Montessori Strategies for Children with Learning Differences, from Parent Child Press.

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From “Montesorta” to Montessori

A transformational journey



NIMA TAHAI

The transformation of Parkside Elementary into Parkside Montessori was far more than a shift in curriculum—it became a story of a community embracing a profound cultural change. What began, as the parents fondly joked, as a state of “Montesorta” evolved into the intentional, structured beauty of an authentic Montessori environment.

Parkside’s journey stood as a joyful and instructive example of what is possible when vision, collaboration, and an unwavering belief in the child come together. It was also, importantly, a story that could not have been written without the partnership of families, a dedicated PTA, inspired teacher leaders, and the steady guidance of an exceptional Montessori coach.

A leap of faith: choosing authenticity

Every meaningful transformation begins with courage, and Parkside’s journey was no exception. The early years required honest reflection—acknowledging that while the school had embraced Montessori in spirit, implementation had been uneven.

What followed was a collective commitment to move beyond “sorta” and toward something deeply intentional.

This work was not carried out by one individual alone. It was supported by district leadership, guided by a strong instructional vision, and brought to life by a passionate, teacher-led, Montessori Leadership Team (MLT) and a

staff willing to rethink long-held practices. At the heart of this shift was also the school’s Montessori coach, whose expertise, clarity, and steady presence helped translate philosophy into daily practice.

Equally essential were Parkside’s families and PTA, who leaned into the transformation with trust and enthusiasm. Their support created the conditions for change to take root and flourish.

Crafting the prepared environment

At the center of Parkside’s transformation was the intentional design of the prepared environment.

Classrooms were reimaged to prioritize uninterrupted work cycles, allowing students to enter deep states of concentration. Materials became accessible, complete, and beautifully displayed—inviting children into purposeful engagement without unnecessary barriers. Child-sized furniture and real tools reinforced a powerful message: this was a space built for children, where they were capable and trusted. Practical life activities, gardening, and food preparation grounded learning in authenticity and purpose.

The environment also became richer and more connected to the natural world. Natural materials, plants, and sensory experiences supported whole-child development, while mixed-age groupings fostered mentorship, leadership, and collaboration. Classrooms evolved into vibrant micro-communities where students learned not only academic skills, but also how to live and work alongside one another with respect.

Importantly, Parkside made intentional decisions about what to minimize. Technology was used thought-

fully rather than pervasively, and while classrooms were alive with activity, they remained orderly, calm, and purposeful.

The adult transformation: from instructor to guide

One of the most profound shifts occurred not in the materials, but in the adults.

Teachers moved from being directors of learning to observers and guides. This required unlearning traditional practice—stepping back from constant instruction, resisting the urge to interrupt, and replacing external praise with strategies that fostered intrinsic motivation.

Instead, educators worked hard to lean into observation, using it as their primary tool for understanding each child’s needs. They cultivated calm, warm classroom presences and delivered precise, intentional lessons. Errors were reframed as opportunities for growth, and interactions with students were grounded in respect and curiosity.

This transformation was made possible through sustained professional learning, thoughtful collaboration within the MLT, and the ongoing coaching that supported teachers in translating theory into practice. The result was a staff that not only understood Montessori more deeply, but embodied it.

The flourishing child

As the adults and environments shifted, so too did the children.

Students became more independent, less reliant on adult approval, and more deeply engaged in meaningful work. Classrooms filled with the un-

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mistakable signs of authentic Montessori learning: joy, concentration, and purposeful activity. Children initiated their own work, persisted through challenges, and completed full cycles of activity. They collaborated naturally, offered help to peers, and resolved conflicts with words and respect.

Perhaps most striking was the development of executive function skills—planning, reflection, and sustained focus—that would serve them far beyond the classroom. These were not just students completing assignments; they were learners developing agency, confidence, and a genuine love of learning.

A strong foundation for sustainability

Behind the scenes, Parkside ensured that its transformation was supported by clear systems and structures. Strategic planning became core to cycles of continuous improvement—moving from hopes to collective actions, and allowing the school to track progress and maintain focus. This balance—between the joy of the classroom and the clarity of systems—proved essential. It ensured that Montessori was not simply an initiative, but a sustainable, evolving model of practice.

The first fruits of the journey

A powerful milestone in Parkside’s journey came with the promotion of its first cohort of 8th-grade students who were the pioneers of the school’s expansion. These students moved on

not only with academic readiness but with independence, confidence, and social responsibility. As they continued into high school, they offered early evidence of the long-term impact of a Montessori education—demonstrating that this work was not only meaningful in the moment, but enduring.

A community effort, a shared success

Parkside’s transformation was, at its core, a community story.

It was the story of teachers willing to grow, of leadership willing to listen and adapt, and of a Montessori coach who provided clarity and direction throughout the process. It was the story of a PTA and parent community that trusted the journey and invested in its success.

Together, they created something far greater than a program—they built a culture.

Key takeaways for the Montessori community

Parkside’s journey offered several important lessons for schools considering a similar path:

- **Start with honesty.** Acknowledge where you are before defining where you want to go.
- **Invest in people.** Transformation depends on teachers, leaders, and coaching working in alignment.
- **Design the environment intentionally.** The prepared environment is foundational, not optional.
- **Shift adult roles.** Lasting change

happens when adults rethink their role.

- **Engage the community.** Families and parent organizations are essential partners.
- **Stay the course.** Deep change takes time, but the results are worth it.

Parkside’s story ultimately demonstrated what can happen when a school dares to move beyond “Montesorta” and fully embrace Montessori. It was a celebration of growth, partnership, and the extraordinary potential that unfolds when children are given the time, space, and trust to thrive.

Nima Tahai is the Principal of Parkside Montessori in San Mateo, California

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The prepared environment as behavior support

Montessori classroom culture supports behavior



KATY WRIGHT

Classroom culture is a current focus of conversation in conventional education about student behavior. Effective classroom conditions for learning are defined in terms of teacher expectations, relationship building, and instructional practices—all cultural elements rather than structural features of the learning environment.

The distinction between culture and structure was first crystallized for me while reading *Loonshots* by Safi Bachall during my doctoral studies in Montessori education at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. My main takeaway was that structure actually plays a *more decisive* role than culture in shaping outcomes. I came to see culture as an emergent property of structure. This book put words to what I have observed in Montessori classrooms: Montessori education's brilliance is in the structural design of the learning environment.

I was a conventional, single grade level educator for a decade before I took Montessori training and moved into a Montessori classroom in a traditional K-5 classroom. I immediately loved how Montessori philosophy suggests looking at the environment first when there is an issue with student behavior. Over the years, it has pained me to watch my single grade level colleagues continue to implement student behavior plans and use tack-on behavior programs to deal with negative

student behavior instead of using the powerful tool of adjusting the learning environment itself.

Since COVID, behavior challenges such as impulsivity and anxiety have become one of the most urgent issues documented in conventional U.S. elementary schools. As negative student behavior intensifies, so do teacher stress and burnout, resulting in a growing wave of educators leaving the field. Seeing how the structure of Montessori classrooms supports student regulation and behavior, I began to wonder which specific structural supports were responsible and whether they could be identified and replicated in conventional K-5 classrooms.

I started to think about conditions during remote learning. Children spent long periods of time at home with much more physical freedom than they typically experienced in conventional, single grade level classrooms at school. They could move around, take breaks when they wanted to, choose where to sit, and adjust their pacing, and they had more opportunities to manage their own regulation throughout the day. In many ways, remote learning reflected the kind of physical freedom students experience in Montessori classrooms.

Returning to classrooms meant stepping back into spaces that were more physically restrictive than what many children had experienced at home. This shift was compounded by the fact that students' academic readiness levels had widened dramatically as a result of the pandemic, a challenge made even more acute in single grade level settings where teachers work with only one grade level of curriculum materials. Rising student dysregulation is often attributed to screentime or socialization gaps, but I began to wonder

whether a loss of physical freedom, and the abrupt return to more restrictive classroom environments, might also be playing a significant role.

In my Montessori classroom, when students display signs of dysregulation, purposeful academic engagement can act as a regulatory anchor and students can find emotional steadiness through concentrated work. Research shows that certain conditions of freedom within Montessori environments may help mitigate the effects of trauma by restoring a sense of control and offering the calming, regulatory benefits of sustained concentration.

Teachers in conventional classrooms often do not have the freedom or training to make real-time adjustments to students' work or to the learning environment. Instead, as behavior concerns have increased post-COVID, districts are doubling down on pacing guides in an attempt to standardize instruction across classrooms in order to raise student achievement. Teachers are expected to maintain tight whole-group schedules even as student needs become more variable and ability spans continue to widen dramatically due to learning interruptions caused by behavior issues. I began to wonder if this creates a cycle in which tightened control contributes to the rising dysregulation.

In conventional education settings, social-emotional learning and academic learning are often treated as separate domains. Academic work is viewed as a cognitive task, something students are expected to do once they are calm, compliant, and ready to learn. In Montessori classrooms, academic work is not something students do after they are regulated; it is a primary way they

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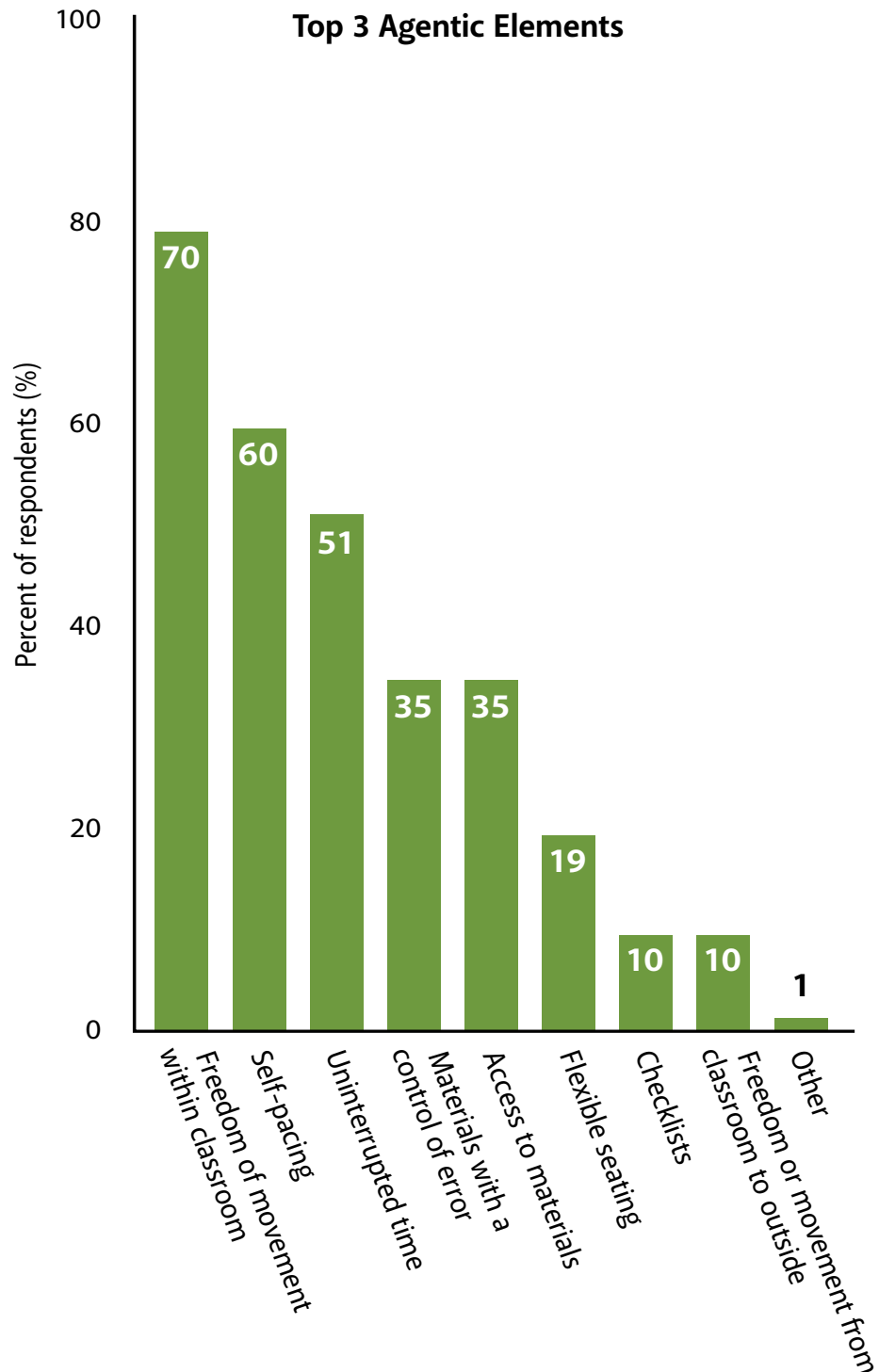
become regulated. Freedom is not something children earn after demonstrating compliance, but a necessary precondition for the development and expression of their agency. Within this freedom, sustained and purposeful work becomes possible and it is through this work that children develop self-regulation, social responsibility, moral awareness, and a growing sense of solidarity with others.

I decided to begin to investigate the structural features of Montessori classrooms. Drawing from Montessori's writings and interviews with twelve experienced Montessori teachers, I developed a preliminary list of autonomy-supportive, structurally embedded environmental features to guide my instrument design. A panel of Montessori experts offered feedback on item clarity and relevance, helping to streamline the list, remove redundancies, and ensured the core elements of the prepared environment were represented.

The list included:

- freedom of movement from classroom to outside
- freedom of movement within the classroom
- access to materials
- materials with a control of error
- flexible seating
- use of checklists
- self-pacing of work
- uninterrupted time

The survey was distributed nationally through Montessori networks, professional associations, school leaders, and social media. Teachers were asked to select the three environmental features they believed most strongly support student autonomy and the development of agency. The survey took less than ten minutes to complete and reached a wide range of teachers across public, charter, magnet, and private Montessori schools. 72 Montessori elementary teachers, most holding Montessori credentials, took part.



Responses converged on three environmental features which best support student agency. Freedom of movement was most frequently selected, followed by self-pacing and uninterrupted time. Nearly all teachers chose at least one freedom of movement option, suggesting that mobility is a powerful structural feature in Montessori environments.

93% of respondents reported intentionally modifying the classroom environment to influence student behavior. Teachers described rearranging furniture, adjusting material placement, facilitating movement pathways, and reducing visual or auditory distractions

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as common strategies for supporting concentration, independence, peer collaboration, conflict resolution, and the preservation of uninterrupted time through decreased distractions.

Research supports the conditions Montessori teachers identified as most essential for student agency. Studies show that self-pacing strengthens academic performance and supports the development of self-regulation, a key predictor of both achievement and emotional well-being. Freedom of movement is consistently linked with improved executive functioning, emotional regulation, and overall psychological health, with neuroscientific research suggesting that voluntary movement activates the neural systems associated with autonomy and agency. Uninterrupted time is tied strongly to concentration, cognitive endurance, and reduced stress, with interruptions shown to impair working memory, increase cognitive load, and elevate stress responses.

Liberty is also a structural condition in Montessori classrooms. Freedom is not granted after students behave well; rather, it is embedded into the environment so the child can practice and develop regulation. As a Montessori practitioner, I feel the tension between

freedom and control every day. When a student is dysregulated, my first instinct is often to tighten expectations or narrow choices. Yet, after reflecting on this study's findings, I see even more clearly that the path back to stability usually begins with restoring the very freedoms that support agency in the first place: the freedom to move, the freedom to self-pace, and the freedom to work without interruption.

It can be difficult to navigate the balance between the academic work I think is essential for long-term achievement, and the student-chosen work that often serves as an entry point back into concentration and regulation. Yet when I honor these freedoms rather than restrict them, I consistently see children return to regulated, pro-social behavior more quickly and authentically.

Although Montessori environments are distinct, the underlying principles of structural autonomy are broadly applicable. The next phase of my doctoral research will investigate whether there is a measurable correlation between negative student behavior and the presence or absence of the key freedoms Montessori teachers identified as most essential. I am deeply grateful to the Montessori teachers who con-

tributed their insights to this preliminary study. Their collective wisdom is guiding the direction of my ongoing research as I work to understand how these structural conditions function outside Montessori settings.

Katy Wright is an E1 Montessori teacher with Helena Public Schools in Montana, and a doctoral candidate in Montessori studies at University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

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