Public Montessori Elementary: Three Models of Implementation

Carolyn Daoust, Ph.D. & Sawako Suzuki, Ph.D.

SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE of CALIFORNIA
KALMANOVITZ SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Introduction

Interpretations of the Montessori method differ considerably in the United States where there are numerous training organizations and no legal specifications for what constitutes Montessori education. While AMI and AMS have issued standards based on authentic Montessori principles, most programs are not accredited. Consequently, what is consistently described as the Montessori method in the literature is inconsistently found in actual Montessori classrooms.

Moreover, with the expansion of public charter schools more communities are considering Montessori education as a viable alternative to more traditional approaches. Today there are more than 450 public Montessori programs. It is unclear, however, to what extent these programs adhere to authentic Montessori practices or what types of modifications are most common.

This study surveyed head teachers at public Montessori elementary schools in the United States to investigate their teaching practices as they relate to traditional Montessori methods.

Research Questions

1. Can public Montessori elementary teachers be classified into meaningful subgroups according to their classroom practices?
2. If clusters can be identified, what characteristics define each subgroup?

Background

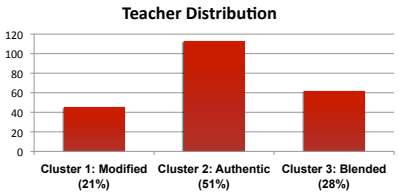
Murray (2005) surveyed 85 public elementary Montessori administrators who all reported having classrooms compatible with Montessori's "prepared environment" principles. Most implemented 3-year multi-age grouping, provided work periods averaging 2.4 hours, and had fully equipped Montessori classrooms. However, only 58% reported being committed to the core Montessori curriculum.

Most of the 65 public Montessori administrators surveyed by Bilton (2004) indicated their classrooms were fully equipped with Montessori materials (75%) and characterized their schools as very committed to the Montessori program (79%). Nonetheless, fewer than half (46%) described their program as authentic.

While these investigations suggest modifications in some public Montessori programs, it is unclear what practices are being altered and to what extent. This study examines program variation by assessing similarities and differences in the classroom practices of public elementary teachers as self-reported on a SurveyMonkey questionnaire.

Method

Quantitative methods were used. 444 public elementary Montessori teachers completed a survey assessing implementation practices. Cluster analysis was used to classify the Montessori educators into meaningful groups. Post-typological analyses indicated significant differences between the identified clusters.



Results

The cluster analysis revealed that Montessori public elementary teachers could be classified into distinct subgroups based on their reported practices associated with the method. A three-cluster solution was found to fit the data best.

Cluster One: (n = 45) Modified

Compared to teachers in the other two subgroups, cluster 1 practitioners placed less emphasis on traditional Montessori practices and curriculum and more on public school procedures, materials and requirements.

Cluster Two: (n = 112) Authentic

Cluster 2 teachers adhered most closely to authentic Montessori practices and were less likely than the other teachers to enact public school procedures and requirements that conflict with established Montessori practice.

Cluster Three: (n = 61) Blended

Cluster 3 teachers fell between the others in their adherence to practices typically associated with high fidelity Montessori programs. Whereas public school procedures were less emphasized, so were many authentic Montessori practices.

Significant Cluster Differences:
Likely To Report This Compared To Other Groups

Public School Practices:	C1: Modified	C2: Authentic	C3: Blended
▪ Assigned Seats	High	Low	Low
▪ Emphasize Textbook Use	High	Low	No dif.
▪ Non-Montessori Instruction Daily	High	Low	No dif.
▪ Work Chosen For Children	High	Low	Low

Montessori Practices:	C1: Modified	C2: Authentic	C3: Blended
▪ 3-Hour Work Period	Low	High	Medium
▪ Creation Story Told	Low	High	Medium
▪ Great Lessons Presented	Low	High	Medium
▪ Montessori Math & Science	Low	High	No dif.
▪ 3-Year Mixed Age Span	Low	High	No dif.
▪ Interest Based Investigations	Low	High	No dif.
▪ Job Chart Used	No dif.	High	Low
▪ Children Select Work Time	Low	High	Low
▪ Children Choose Snack Time	Medium	High	Low

Demographics:	C1: Modified	C2: Authentic	C3: Blended
▪ Post BA	Low	High	High
▪ Montessori Credential	Low	High	High
▪ Charter School	Low	High	Low
▪ Mont. Trained Administrator	Low	High	Low
▪ Children with Mont ECE	Low	High	No dif.
▪ Program with Mont ECE	Low	High	Low

No Cluster Differences:

In terms of public school practices, there were no differences between the groups in the extent they reported using grade level reading groups, spelling tests, math fact drill, divided activity periods and prizes for good behavior.

The groups also did not differ on most choice variables, the extent they provided opportunities for going out/community service, the range of Montessori materials offered, and whether they maintained a clean, well-organized environment.

Demographically, there were no group differences related to the size of the school, the school's affiliation, or the percentage of children with free lunch. The groups also did not differ in terms of the teacher's age, gender, ethnicity, years of teaching in their current job, years of prior teaching and whether the teacher was AMI or AMS trained.

Discussion

The clusters identified in this study differed significantly on a number of demographic variables. Whereas the *authentic* teachers were more likely to report supportive demographic factors such as teaching in a charter school, holding a Montessori credential, having a Montessori trained administrator, and teaching children with Montessori ECE, *blended* teachers only reported some of these characteristics, and *modified* teachers were less likely to report any of these supports.

While it is unclear which of these demographic factors are most important for maintaining high fidelity programs, these findings highlight an association between teacher and school characteristics and the enactment of authentic practices useful for establishing and sustaining quality Montessori programs in the public sector.

Conclusions

Given research showing higher fidelity programs associated with better student outcomes (Lillard, 2012), the finding that half the elementary teachers surveyed in this study were not consistently implementing practices typically associated with Montessori education is of concern. While there is consensus across Montessori organizations on the essential elements for successful public Montessori programs (NCMPS, n.d.), this investigation indicates these standards have not been consistently adopted and/or maintained.

Recruiting and training Montessori teachers as school administrators, developing efficient ways for obtaining both state and Montessori teaching credentials, and supporting charter school development will be essential if Montessori education is to reach its full potential in the public sector.

Bilton, H. (2004). Characteristics of public Montessori programs in the United States. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Argosy University.

Lillard, A. S. (2012). Preschool children's development in classic Montessori, supplemented Montessori, and conventional programs. *Journal of School Psychology*, 50, 379-401.

Murray, A. (2008). Public perceptions of Montessori education. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Kansas.

National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (n.d.). Essential elements of successful Montessori schools in the public school sector. Retrieved from: http://www.public-montessori.org

Acknowledgements

This study was supported partially by the Faculty Development Fund at Saint Mary's College of California.