

Montessori Pedagogy and Policy in Public Schools: Exploring the Challenges and Moving toward Advocacy

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Background

Achieving high-fidelity implementation of Montessori education in public schools can be challenging (Chattin-McNichols, 2016; Lillard, 2019; Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008). Policy mandates placed on public schools often do not align with Montessori teaching and learning. Consequently, Montessori public school teachers navigate an educational policy system daily that often needs to align with their pedagogy (Block, 2015; Gerker, in press; Suchman, 2008).

Policy challenges are not a unique concern for Montessori public schools. Many teachers from different pedagogical backgrounds experience the tension between policy and practice. For example, public school teachers "devote large amounts of classroom time to test preparation" (Abrams et al., 2003) and are shaping their curriculum to match standardized tests (Au, 2011). As such, the policies that mandate standardized tests are pushing the focus away from what is known as best practice in child-centered education and creating a more teacher-centered pedagogy (Au, 2011). The most salient policy challenges previously identified for Montessori public school teachers are federal and state regulations, such as standardized tests (Block, 2015; Borgman, 2021; Valli & Buese, 2007; Williamson et al., 2005). Additional significant challenges include teacher issues, budget cuts, and district support (Murray & Peyton, 2008).

Despite these challenges, many schools are successful in implementing "truly Montessori environments within public schools" (Murray & Peyton, 2008, p. 30). Indeed, teachers "do not have to sacrifice high-quality, child-centered pedagogy" (Williamson et al., 2005, p. 194) to manage the challenging requirements of high-stakes testing.



Research Questions

1. How, if at all, does public Montessori teachers' pedagogy shift due to education policies?
2. How do public Montessori teachers perceive their capacity to engage in policies as they relate to the Montessori pedagogy?

Methods

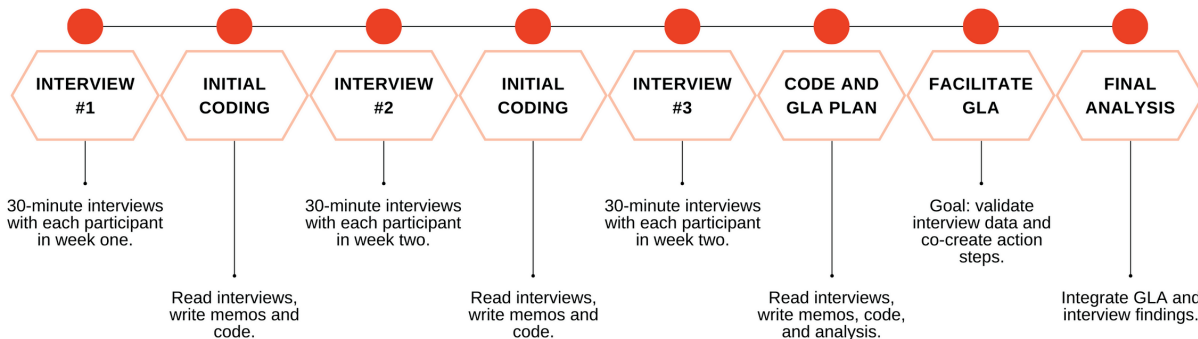
I conducted 30-minute semi-structured interviews over three weeks, one interview per week. This format, known as serial interviews, made participation feasible for teachers with limited time to participate (Read, 2018). The extra time between each interview also allowed for researcher reflexivity practices such as writing memos and initial readings of data.

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently. After each week of interviews, I read transcriptions, familiarized myself with the data, and began generating initial codes. By conducting analysis between each interview, I could explore different aspects of participant experiences and double-check the information shared in each interview (Read, 2018).

Participants also received transcripts of their interviews for member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Participants

Pseudonym	Years Teaching	Level	State
Jill	6 years	Early Childhood (preschool/kindergarten)	Ohio
Claire	13 years	Early Childhood (preschool/kindergarten)	Ohio
Allie	6 years	Middle School (7 th & 8 th grades)	North Carolina
Noah	12 years	High School (11 th & 12 th grades)	Wisconsin
Ashley	2 years	High School (11 th & 12 th grades)	Wisconsin
Kathy	22 years	Lower Elementary (1 st , 2 nd , & 3 rd grade)	Ohio
Tammy	27 years	Upper Elementary (4 th , 5 th , & 6 th grades)	Ohio
Flo	7 years	Upper Elementary (4 th , 5 th , & 6 th grades)	Illinois



Methods (continued)

Using a combination of deductive coding and inductive coding, I analyzed the interview data to inform the planning for a modified group-level assessment (GLA) with interview participants. GLA is a participatory group method used to collaboratively generate and analyze data through developing community and leading to action steps (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014). All participants were invited to the GLA; however, due to time and capacity, only three participants attended (Kathy, Jill, and Allie). GLA's are designed for larger groups, yet, the small group in this GLA produced meaningful qualitative results while building community among the participants (Vaughn, Jacquez, Zhao, & Lang, 2011). The GLA prompts were developed from the coding analysis process of the interview data. Participants responded to each prompt, then reviewed and analyzed their responses to identify themes. **GLA participants synthesized their responses through three themes: 1) elements of Montessori pedagogy – "it's more than the materials," 2) districts attempting to "force a square peg in a round hole," and 3) lack of respect for teachers' expertise at the district level.**

Findings

Policies shape a teacher's daily work—whether they realize it or not—often creating challenges rather than supporting them in teaching (Perryman et al., 2017). In this study, teachers shared their experiences with how their Montessori pedagogy may be shaped by policy and how, if at all, they respond to or engage with policymakers. Participants identified the following six actionable suggestions for district leadership and teacher education programs.

1 Listen to teachers through actions, not just words.

2 Form Montessori specific advocacy committees at the district level.

3 State and district-level Marketing campaigns to support general knowledge of the Montessori Method.

4 Create school-specific policies rather than "one size fits all" policies.

5 Provide Montessori specific professional development.

6 Include advocacy and policy work in Montessori Teacher Education programs.

While participants often referred to standardized testing as a key challenge, they also talked about ways they have aligned their pedagogy to the tests without shifting their pedagogy. However, the most salient challenges identified in this study were directly related to district-specific policies. For example:

- Beyond testing requirements, Ashley and Noah explained their struggles with the building schedules and only seeing students for 60-90 minutes at a time. They both independently described how they observe students struggling to get in the flow they need to work on projects for longer periods of time—a core tenet of the Montessori philosophy (Montessori, 1964).
- Noah further explained a shift to their building's schedule that was made specifically due to attendance procedures. Front office staff need to locate students quickly, block scheduling is confusing, and "attendance means dollars [to the district]."

Participants also described different ways they respond to district-wide requirements:

- Claire shared, "If there is some new thing that doesn't serve my students directly, I usually completely ignore it and apologize later if anybody notices, which nobody usually does."
- Flo explained a new scope and sequence the district said all schools had to follow. She worked with colleagues in her building to show the district how Montessori "hits all standards." Flo reported, "it was a legitimate three-year battle to even get them to sit down in a meeting with us and look at our scope and sequence to prove that we are actually doing what they want us to do."

The final suggested action step is for teacher education programs and confirms that Montessori education programs focus closely on the philosophy while navigating policy is often omitted from the teacher training (Christenson, 2016).

“ It's an entire system [Montessori education] set up to help children be successful in their own lives. I don't know how you manage to do that if all you really care about is math scores and reading scores [standardized tests]. You just don't. I'm a whole human being, and I have way more shoved into me than math and reading. ”



References

Limitations

Teachers that may have had experience in advocating for Montessori education prior to participating may be included in this study's sample. Prior advocacy experience was not a variable considered or asked about before recruitment and may shift the findings.

This study was also limited by the need for a common definition of high-fidelity Montessori education.

Future Research

This study laid the groundwork for a line of research focused on public school Montessori teacher's advocacy for high-fidelity Montessori implementation. Future research should expand the scope of participants to first understand their level of policy engagement and then co-create ways to support the implementation of high-fidelity Montessori in public schools.