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Pathways to Global Montessori Research

***Montessori Literacy Today: Aligning Timeless
Practice With Modern Demands***

Volume 2

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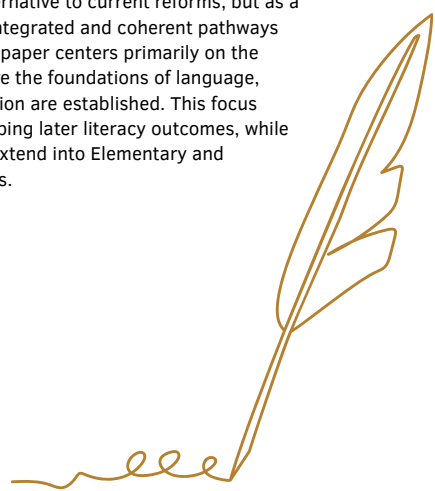
Executive Summary

Literacy instruction in the United States remains deeply divided, even as reading outcomes stagnate and inequities persist (Morgan & Hu, 2025; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2019). This paper argues that Montessori education is uniquely positioned to move beyond this divide by offering an integrated, evidence-aligned approach to literacy that bridges longstanding tensions in the field.

The Montessori literacy model combines embodied, multisensory learning with explicit and structured skill development. Through carefully sequenced materials, it supports both word recognition and language comprehension in tandem, aligning closely with frameworks such as Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001). Research suggests that Montessori can produce strong and equitable literacy outcomes when implemented with fidelity and paired with explicit instruction (Lillard & Heise, 2016; Zoll et al., 2023). A case study of an urban public Montessori school illustrates how these principles translate into practice through aligned materials, structured teaching, and sustained professional learning.

To ensure effectiveness and accountability, Montessori schools must adopt clear systems for measuring and communicating student learning. This includes combining traditional observation with structured tools, standardized screeners, and collaborative inquiry (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, 2019). At the same time, variability in implementation remains a key risk. Without attention to fidelity, cultural responsiveness, and clear communication of academic outcomes, Montessori programs may fall short of their potential to advance equity (Debs, 2019). This paper examines these issues across five areas: (a) the current challenge in literacy education, (b) the Montessori literacy model, (c) the supporting evidence base and its translation into practice through a case study, (d) measurement and signals, and (e) key risks, limits, and equity considerations.

Taken together, Montessori is viewed not as an alternative to current reforms, but as a coherent and integrated pathway forward. These integrated and coherent pathways span multiple developmental planes; however, this paper centers primarily on the Early Childhood and Lower Elementary years, where the foundations of language, phonological awareness, and symbolic representation are established. This focus reflects the critical role of early experiences in shaping later literacy outcomes, while also acknowledging that the principles described extend into Elementary and Adolescent programs in increasingly abstract forms.

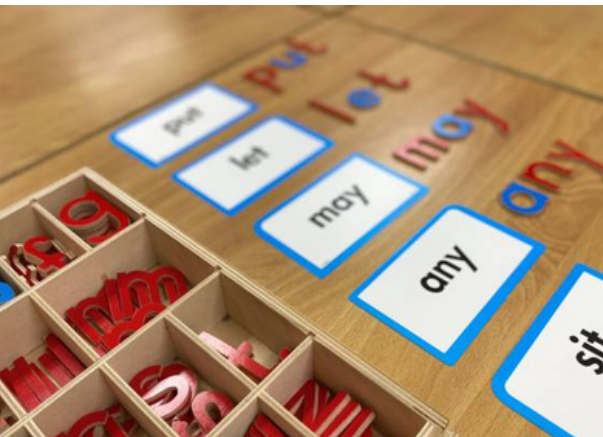


The Challenge

Few debates in education have generated more heat, or more division, than the one over how children learn to read. On one side stand proponents of whole language instruction, a philosophy rooted in the belief that reading emerges naturally when children are immersed in meaningful text and learn to read using context clues and sight words, with little or no specific emphasis on phonics and decoding (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). On the other side stands the science of reading movement, which draws on decades of cognitive and linguistic research to argue that most children need explicit, systematic instruction in phonics and decoding to become proficient readers (Yaghmour & Obaidat, 2022). This is not merely an academic disagreement. The stakes are visible in the data. According to the Nation's Report Card, only 33% of U.S. fourth graders read at or above grade level (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2019). This is a troubling figure that falls even lower for Black students, Latinx students, and those eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2019).

Perhaps most sobering, the reading gaps for Black students today are no smaller, in relative terms, than they were in 1992 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2019). Decades of debate have not translated into progress for the students who need it most. In response to these gaps and often inspired by the viral podcast *Sold a Story* (Hanford, 2022), policymakers have begun to act. According to *Education Week*, 40 states have now passed laws or implemented policies requiring schools to adopt curricula aligned with the science of reading (Schwartz, 2022). The pressure on districts, schools, and teachers to demonstrate that their literacy programs are producing strong readers is becoming acute (Hanford, 2022): the landscape of literacy education is shifting, and every school, including Montessori schools, must grapple with what that shift means.

“According to the Nation's Report Card , only 33% of U.S. fourth graders read at or above grade level ”





For the Montessori community, this moment invites a particular kind of self-examination. Researcher Mira Debs (2019) has documented how different communities have engaged with Montessori education in different ways across its history and how the language Montessori practitioners use to talk about academic excellence shapes who feels welcomed by the method and who does not. When rigor is discussed primarily in terms of intrinsic motivation, follow-the-child philosophy, or the organic unfolding of the prepared environment, it can inadvertently signal that explicit academic goals are foreign to Montessori's values (Debs, 2019). For families, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, who are looking for evidence that a school will deliver strong academic outcomes for their children, this kind of language can read as evasion (Debs, 2019). How we talk about academic excellence in Montessori is not a neutral act. It carries real consequences for inclusion and equity within our community.

Thus, how Montessori schools track, measure, and communicate literacy outcomes matters: not just for accountability, but for belonging. If the data we collect and the language we use to discuss it center only on certain kinds of learners or certain visions of success, we risk perpetuating the very exclusions our community seeks to overcome. Building a more inclusive Montessori practice may require micro-adaptations: small but deliberate shifts in how we describe what students are learning, how we present evidence of growth, and how we invite families into that conversation (Debs, 2019; Debs et al., 2024). Foregrounding academic excellence when we communicate outside the Montessori insider community is not about abandoning Montessori's philosophy: it is about fully living up to it.

The Montessori method, as Lillard (2021) describes, occupies a unique pedagogical role by collapsing traditional dichotomies in early education, such as work and play and structure and freedom, through an integration in practice. Similarly, the Montessori literacy curriculum is well positioned to move beyond the reading wars because it systematically integrates the intertwined, multidimensional processes of language comprehension and word recognition described in Scarborough's Reading Rope (DeJulio et al., 2024; Scarborough, 2001). Rather than privileging one side of this framework over the other, Montessori materials and curriculum develop both strands in tandem, combining rich oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension work with explicit, sequential support for phonemic awareness and decoding (Zoll et al., 2023). This integrated approach directly addresses the core divide of the reading wars by demonstrating that strong literacy instruction requires the coordinated development of both domains within a coherent system.

At the same time, persistent literacy gaps, especially among historically marginalized students, underscore that access to Montessori materials alone is not sufficient and that how the model is implemented matters (Cotner, 2025; Socol, 2024). A growing body of research suggests that variability in outcomes is driven less by Montessori as a model than by differences in fidelity and instructional practice.

For example, studies by Angeline Lillard and colleagues show that children in high-fidelity Montessori classrooms demonstrate stronger gains in reading and language than those in lower-fidelity or mixed-model environments, highlighting the importance of consistent use of Montessori materials and methods (Lillard et al., 2023; Lillard & Heise, 2016). This is not to suggest that fidelity to Montessori principles should limit the model's cultural applicability or accessibility. In fact, historically and across diverse communities, Montessori has been adapted through culturally responsive micro-adaptations to better serve local needs and contexts (Debs et al., 2024). Moreover, exploratory research indicates that Montessori education can support outcomes reflecting greater racial and ethnic parity (Lillard et al., 2023; Iruka et al., 2025).

In this context, Montessori's constructivist approach, which emphasizes learner-driven discovery, is best understood not as a substitute for structured teaching but as a complement to it. A substantial body of research shows that most children require explicit, systematic, and sequential instruction to master the code of written language, particularly in the early stages of reading acquisition (Al Otaiba et al., 2022; Ehri et al., 2001; Lane et al., 2025). Emerging classroom-based research further suggests that integrating structured literacy approaches within Montessori environments strengthens phonemic awareness and early reading outcomes, especially when aligned with existing materials and routines (Thompson, 2024).



Evidence from both research and school-based practice therefore points in a consistent direction. Students achieve the strongest literacy outcomes when Montessori materials are culturally relevant (Carver, 2023; D'Cruz Ramos, 2024; Yezbick, 2007), implemented with fidelity (Lillard & Heise, 2016), and intentionally paired with explicit, systematic instruction, rather than treated as alternatives to it (Archer & Hughes, 2010; Zoll et al., 2023). Realizing this potential requires investment in professional learning, sustained instructional coaching, and careful fidelity to Montessori materials in both presentation and use. The question is not whether Montessori can deliver equitable literacy outcomes (Lillard et al., 2025; Randolph et al., 2023). It is whether we are willing to do the work to make that happen.

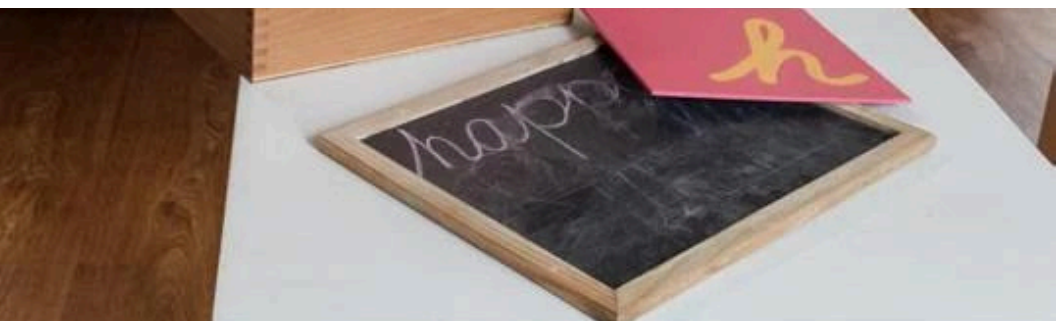


Montessori Literacy Model

The Montessori approach to literacy emphasizes the integration of physical engagement with cognitive development, making reading and writing both embodied and accessible. As Montessori (1948) explains, “two mechanical factors of writing are resolved into two independent exercises, that is, drawing... and touch[ing] the letters of the alphabet,” which together build motor and visual memory (p. 209). This intentional design enables children to develop fine motor skills while simultaneously forming durable associations with letter forms.

Core Montessori materials—such as sandpaper letters, the moveable alphabet, and phonogram work—explicitly connect movement, sound, and symbol, supporting the development of phonetic awareness (Marshall, 2017). This embodied approach reflects a broader understanding of cognition as inherently connected to physical experience (Gallagher, 2023; Macedonia, 2019). Additionally, these materials are carefully designed to isolate individual concepts and reduce extraneous stimuli, minimizing demands on salience determination while engaging sensorimotor systems for more efficient encoding (Eng et al., 2020). In doing so, they support the integration of motor memory, visual recognition, and abstract literacy understanding (Laski & Wang, 2023).

Montessori environments are intentionally designed to reduce allostatic load, creating conditions that support attention, self-regulation, and learning (Lucente & Guidi, 2023; Foster, 2025; Neuenschwander et al., 2014). Within these environments, developmentally responsive and learner-driven engagement with materials promotes independence while strengthening executive function, including inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and persistence (Carlson, 2023; Guerrero et al., 2023; Mallett, 2023). As Lillard (2021) suggests, Montessori effectively bridges traditional divides in education, seen here as the seamless integration of the *science of reading* (Shanahan, 2020) with the broader *science of learning* (Brown et al., 2014) in everyday classroom practice.

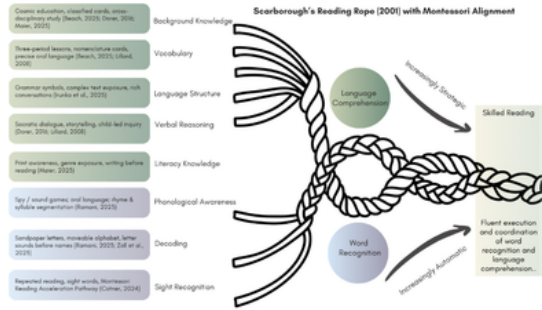


The science of reading highlights that skilled reading emerges from multiple interdependent components, often represented through Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001). This framework organizes reading into two primary domains—**Language Comprehension** and **Word Recognition**—each composed of several interacting sub-strands. Montessori literacy practices align closely with this model, offering concrete, structured experiences that map onto each strand (Figure 1).

Scarborough's Reading Rope and Montessori Alignment

The Language Comprehension domain includes background knowledge, vocabulary, language structure, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge (Scarborough, 2001). Montessori environments support these areas through an emphasis on precise oral language, particularly in early childhood, which strengthens both vocabulary and conceptual understanding (Beach, 2025; Lillard, 2008).

Figure 1 - Scarborough's Reading Rope



Adapted from Scarborough, H.S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), Handbook for research in early literacy (pp. 97 – 110). New York: Guilford Press.

Materials such as classified cards and the three-period lesson reinforce vocabulary acquisition, while the elementary focus on cosmic education builds broad, interconnected background knowledge (Beach, 2025; Pereira et al., 2014; Ramani, 2023). Rich conversations, early grammar work, and exposure to complex texts further support the development of language structure, verbal reasoning, and print awareness (Beach, 2025; Lillard, 2008; Maier, 2023). The Word Recognition domain—comprising phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition—is similarly supported through Montessori materials and lessons (Scarborough, 2001). Early experiences such as sound games and oral language activities lay a strong foundation for phonological awareness (Beach, 2025; Ramani, 2023). The practice of introducing letter sounds before letter names provides a clear pathway to decoding, reinforced through multisensory materials like sandpaper letters and the moveable alphabet (Beach, 2025; Ramani, 2023). Over time, repeated reading and targeted materials support the development of automatic word recognition, including through approaches such as the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway (Cotner, 2024).

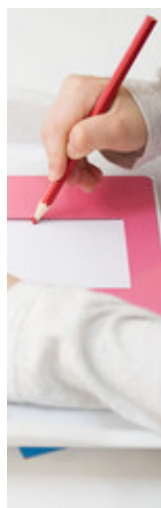
Taken together, Montessori materials and instructional practices systematically address the interwoven components of Scarborough's Reading Rope (Appendix A). This alignment demonstrates how Montessori literacy instruction operationalizes the science of reading within a cohesive, developmentally grounded framework, as illustrated in the case study that follows.

Evidence Base & Practice Translation

As established, Montessori materials provide developmentally responsive access to literacy instruction by aligning with children's cognitive, social, and sensorimotor learning processes. At the same time, literacy remains a critical social justice issue, disproportionately affecting children of color (Morgan & Hu, 2025; Socol, 2024). This reality creates a moral imperative for schools serving historically marginalized communities to implement the most effective, evidence-based instructional approaches (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2023; Wink, 2011). Montessori teacher preparation emphasizes constructivist principles, including literacy instruction that fosters conceptual understanding and learner independence. However, research from the science of reading demonstrates that explicit, systematic instruction is highly effective for developing foundational literacy skills (Yaghmour & Obiadat, 2022), highlighting the need to thoughtfully integrate these practices into Montessori environments while maintaining a child-centered approach.

Evidence from a public Montessori school in urban Massachusetts illustrates how research-based practices can be translated into Montessori classrooms. Data were collected from four classrooms, two kindergarten and two Lower Elementary, before and after implementing a reading program that incorporates direct instruction into Montessori lessons. The strongest literacy gains occurred when traditional Montessori materials were intentionally paired with highly structured literacy instruction. Reading Acceleration Pathway (Cotner, 2024), which integrates Montessori lessons with explicit, science-based instructional sequences, demonstrating how constructivist environments can be strengthened through intentional instructional design. This approach provides students with scaffolded opportunities to develop foundational literacy skills while preserving the hands-on, self-directed, and multisensory learning experiences central to Montessori pedagogy.

By documenting classroom practices, student work, and assessment outcomes before and after program implementation, educators evaluated the effectiveness of integrating structured literacy strategies into Montessori settings. This evidence highlights the potential for Montessori-informed, evidence-based literacy instruction to address both academic skill development and equity in learning outcomes, ensuring that all students, including those historically underserved, receive high-quality literacy instruction.



The School

The school is a public Montessori charter school serving 306 students in grades K–8. Because of Massachusetts funding structures, the school does not incorporate a traditional Children’s House; Lower Elementary and Upper Elementary following traditional Montessori three-year age spans. The school serves a diverse population: 41% White, 45% Latinx, and 13% identifying as Black, Asian, or Multiracial. Forty-seven percent of students are low-income, 9% are actively receiving multilingual learner (MLL) services, though many more students speak multiple languages, and 19% are students with identified disabilities (H. Herklotz, personal communication, March 2026).

The Classrooms

Two kindergarten classrooms participated in this study: K1 and K2. Both are led by an AMS-trained guide with an assistant and enroll 18 children, all five years old.

Two Lower Elementary classrooms also participated. LE1 is led by an AMS-trained guide with an assistant and enrolls 21 students: 6 first graders, 6 second graders, and 9 third graders. LE2 is led by an MPI-trained guide with an assistant and enrolls 21 students: 8 first graders, 7 second graders, and 6 third graders (H. Herklotz, personal communication).

Across both Lower Elementary classrooms, 67% of students are BIPOC and 33% are White; 26% are multilingual learners and 57% are low-income. Across both kindergarten classrooms, 64% of students are BIPOC and 36% are White; 11% are multilingual learners and 47% are low-income (H. Herklotz, personal communication).

The Program

The Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway (Cotner, 2024) uses Montessori lessons and materials—with minimal supplemental material—organized within a clear, structured sequence. This structure gives teachers explicit guidance on which lessons each child needs and incorporates targeted direct instruction in the building blocks of language, particularly phonological awareness. Critically, the program is designed to remain consistent with the Montessori philosophy: its direct instructional elements function as micro-adjustments within Montessori lessons rather than as departures from the approach.

The school began implementing the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway (Cotner, 2024) in its kindergarten and Lower Elementary programs in 2024. During the 2025–2026 school year, curriculum staff worked with teachers on consistency and fidelity of implementation, bringing both the Lower Elementary and kindergarten classrooms to full implementation.



Kindergarten Results

In September 2025, all 36 kindergarten students completed the fall DIBELS benchmark assessment; 11.1% were reading at grade level. At the same time, K1 received a DERS average score of 70.8, with its lowest subscore in social fluency and emotional flexibility (68) and its highest in linguistic and cultural fluency (74). K2 received a DERS average score of 54, with its lowest subscore in social fluency and emotional flexibility (52) and its highest in linguistic and cultural fluency (56).

By January 2026, 22.9% of kindergarten students were reading at grade level. This more than doubled the proportion from the fall. DERS scores rose in both classrooms over the same period. K1's average score increased to 80.2, with the lowest subscore in social fluency and emotional flexibility (75) and the highest in inhibitory control and linguistic and cultural fluency (both 82). K2's average score increased to 73.6, with the lowest subscore in social fluency and emotional flexibility (66) and the highest in inhibitory control (77).

Lower Elementary Results

In September 2025, all 42 Lower Elementary students completed the fall DIBELS benchmark assessment; 42.9% were reading at grade level. Within that figure, the proportion of students requiring intensive support decreased with each grade level: 50% of first graders, 38% of second graders, and 27% of third graders were categorized as needing intensive support. DERS scores taken in early October showed LE1 with an average of 72, its lowest subscore in social fluency and emotional flexibility (68) and its highest in inhibitory control (76). LE2 had an average of 63.4, with its lowest subscore in social fluency and emotional flexibility (56) and its highest scores in linguistic and cultural fluency, and initiation and concentration (both 66).

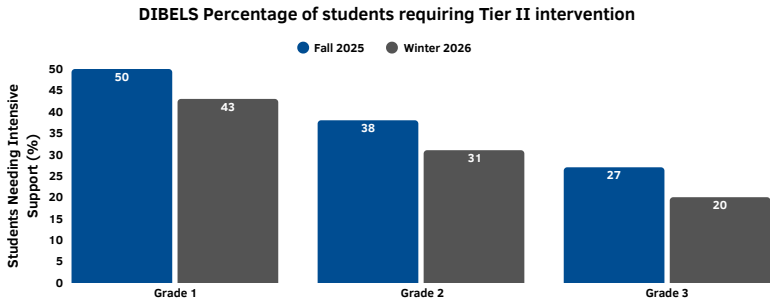
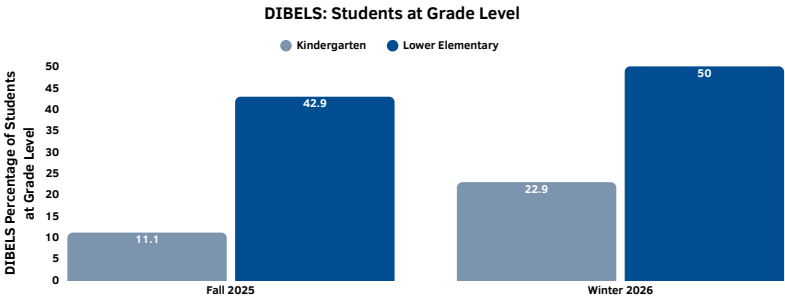


By January 2026, 50% of Lower Elementary students were reading at grade level. Across all grade levels, the proportion of students categorized as needing intensive support fell by approximately 7 percentage points: 43% of first graders, 31% of second graders, and 20% of third graders met that threshold, compared to 50%, 38%, and 27% respectively in the fall. Additionally, in February, LE2 had an average DERS score of 66.6, with its lowest subscore in the working memory domain (63) and the highest subscore in the inhibitory control domain (70). In February, LE1 had an average score of 77.4, with its lowest subscore in the inhibitory control domain (76) and the highest subscore in the linguistic and cultural fluency domain (80).

Figure 2: Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway
Fall 2025 → Winter 2026 · Urban Public Montessori School

AT A GLANCE

K at grade level	LE at grade level	K avg. DERS	LE avg. DERS
11% → 23%	43% → 50%	62 → 77	68 → 72
Doubled	+7 pts	+15pts	+4 pts



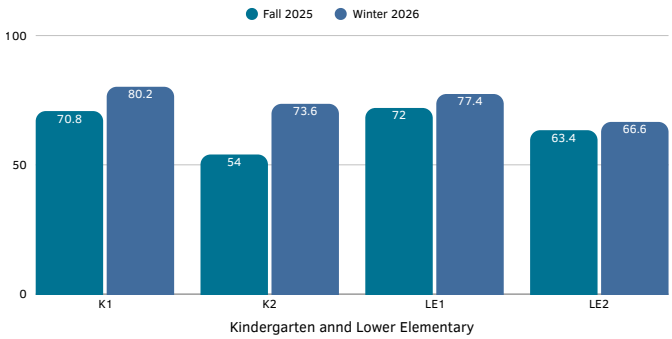
Looking at the Data

The school uses three benchmark assessments to measure literacy and classroom quality. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) benchmark assessments are administered three times per year: fall, winter, and spring. This provides a consistent measure of reading proficiency across kindergarten and Lower Elementary (University of Oregon, 2019). These benchmarks also offer insight into students' incoming literacy levels, particularly in kindergarten. The Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway's (Cotner, 2024) progress monitoring assessments are administered every six weeks to ensure students are mastering the foundational skills necessary to progress. Finally, the school uses the Developmental Environment Rating Scale (DERS), developed by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS), to measure the likelihood that classroom environments are fostering initiation and concentration, cultural and linguistic fluency, working memory, inhibitory control, and social fluency and emotional flexibility (Iruka et al., 2025 & National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector [NCMPS], 2017). Together, these three assessments demonstrate that the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway's (Cotner, 2024) progress monitoring tracks closely with the state-mandated DIBELS benchmarks, and that literacy scores rise alongside DERS scores (Figures 2 and 3).

“...these three assessments demonstrate that the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway's progress monitoring tracks closely with the state-mandated DIBELS benchmarks, and that literacy scores rise alongside DERS scores”



Figure 3: DERS Scores in Fall 2025 and Winter 2026



DERS = Developmental Environment Rating Scale (max 100). All findings from the fall benchmark (Sep 2025) and the winter benchmark (Jan–Feb 2026).

The Developmental Environmental Rating Scale (DERS), developed by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, provides an observational framework for examining child behavior, adult practice, and environmental characteristics associated with developmental learning outcomes (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector [NCMPS], 2017).

Interpretation

While these findings do not establish a causal relationship, they are consistent with the hypothesis that the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway (Cotner, 2024) supports literacy growth. After four months of implementation, reading scores increased across all classrooms, with the most pronounced gains in kindergarten. Equally notable, the program's direct instructional elements are integrated into Montessori lessons as micro-adjustments. For example, small group instruction and many of the Montessori materials and lessons remain consistent with traditional Montessori practice and presentations (Cotner, 2024).

Beyond this consistency, the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway program offers a clear scope and sequence for delivering lessons with sufficient scaffolding to support strong literacy development, regular progress monitoring, and explicit instruction in blending, tapping out sounds, and phonemic and phonological foundations (Cotner, 2024). Because Montessori-trained teachers vary in their familiarity with science-of-reading practices, it is worth noting that the teachers in this case study reported greater confidence and stronger alignment between programs following the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathways training (H. Herklotz, personal communication). Further supporting the hypothesis that the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway did not interfere with Montessori fidelity, implementation did not hinder improvements in DERS scores. Both literacy outcomes and the quality of the classroom environment rose together. This pattern suggests that structured, explicit literacy instruction and high-quality Montessori environments are not in tension but can reinforce one another.



Measurement & Signals

For Program Leaders

For Montessori schools seeking to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of literacy instruction, a range of complementary measurements and signals can be employed. Central to this work is the consistent, thoughtful, and thorough observation that Montessori practitioners already use as part of both formative and summative assessment (Zoll et al., 2023). Building on this foundation, educators can incorporate more structured observation and documentation practices, such as those outlined in the *Montessori Assessment Playbook*, which emphasizes holistic, child-centered progress reporting through work samples, lesson records, and developmental benchmarks (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector [NCMPS], 2019). Together, these approaches remain aligned with Montessori principles while enabling teachers to systematically track student growth over time.

In addition to observation-based methods, adopting a standardized screening system can provide further insight into student progress. For example, DIBELS is available free of charge through the University of Oregon, allowing practitioners to screen students beginning in kindergarten and identify those who may benefit from targeted intervention (University of Oregon, 2019). Complementing these tools, structured opportunities for educator collaboration—such as professional learning communities or teacher focus groups—can help make instructional practices more visible and measurable while fostering reflection on both teaching strategies and student outcomes (Falchuk, 2023).

For Schools and Educators

For schools interested in implementing the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway (Cotner, 2024), Montessori For All offers both the necessary materials and training to support effective adoption. As an organization dedicated to advancing equity through public Montessori education, Montessori For All emphasizes the importance of fidelity in implementation (Montessori for All, 2019). Educators involved in this case study similarly reported that completing the associated training was an essential step in successfully launching the program (B. Paul, personal communication, September 2025). Accordingly, best practice suggests that any school or system adopting the pathway ensure that teaching staff are fully trained in its use, progress monitoring, and instructional methods.



For Educators and Training Programs

Finally, this work can be strengthened by drawing on broader frameworks for reflective practice. Joan Wink, an education scholar known for her contributions to critical pedagogy, encourages educators to attend to the complexity and inequity inherent in classroom environments (Wink, 2011). In *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*, she introduces the concept of ‘the mess,’ which captures the ambiguous and often challenging dynamics that emerge in teaching and learning contexts. Rather than avoiding these challenges, Wink advocates for a deliberate process of engaging with them through three stages: identifying the mess, engaging in collaborative analysis and dialogue, and implementing iterative actions while reflecting on their impact. This framework complements Montessori approaches by reinforcing the importance of ongoing inquiry, collaboration, and responsive practice in improving literacy outcomes.

Participating in Local, Regional, and National Conversations

As the national conversation around literacy continues, Montessori schools, particularly those in the public sector, will be faced with a choice: whether to abandon our methods and materials to adopt curricula that are supported by the district, or to engage in the work necessary to help Montessori methods gain recognition within mainstream education. Curricula such as the Montessori Reading Acceleration Pathway can be helpful when demonstrating to district officials that Montessori materials and lessons contain the requisite instructional elements to support science-based reading instruction (A. Frazer, personal communication). However, more work needs to be done to “translate” Montessori practices into language that is understood by those making district-wide curriculum decisions: both the lessons and the type of staffing and support that schools need to successfully implement the Montessori method. The Montessori Public Policy Initiative (Montessori Public Policy Initiative, n.d.) serves as a resource to help Montessori school leaders bridge the communication gap between Montessori schools and district/policy leadership.



Risks, Limits, and Equity Checks

Charting a pathway forward requires aligning professional learning, teacher education, and system-level support with the instructional strengths of Montessori literacy materials. Montessori-specific tools, such as coaching rubrics and reflective practice frameworks, provide research-informed guidance for fostering teacher leadership, observation skills, and instructional growth (Damore & Rieckoff, 2025; Murray et al., 2024).

In the near term, AMS and member schools should prioritize professional development that deepens teachers' understanding of how material design supports literacy development and executive function, with particular attention to sequencing, error control, and individualized pacing for diverse learners. Schools and systems can take actionable steps by investing in sustained, practice-based coaching; protecting uninterrupted work cycles; and intentionally integrating structured, explicit literacy instruction that complements Montessori's constructivist materials rather than replacing them. Such approaches support systematic skill development while preserving learner agency and material-based learning. Over the longer term, the broader field should support research examining the relationships among Montessori materials, executive functions, and literacy outcomes across diverse populations (Segers, et al., 2016). Teacher education and accreditation standards should more explicitly foreground material-based pedagogy, cognitive science, and inclusive practices, while policy advocacy should emphasize Montessori's evidence-aligned contributions to literacy, independence, and educational equity.



At this inflection point in literacy education, it is essential that the Montessori community actively join the broader national conversation, not as a defensive response to the reading wars, but as a constructive contribution to their resolution. Too often, the debate has been framed as a binary between whole language and the science of reading, despite growing consensus that effective literacy instruction requires integrating both language comprehension and word recognition (Scarborough, 2001). Montessori is uniquely positioned to offer a third path forward: one that already embodies this integration in practice through its coordinated emphasis on rich oral language, conceptual understanding, and explicit, sequential development of phonemic awareness and decoding (Lillard, 2021; Zoll et al., 2023).

However, realizing this potential requires Montessori educators and leaders to more clearly articulate, measure, and communicate how their approach aligns with and advances the evidence base. Engaging in this dialogue is not simply about validation; it is about equity. As literacy outcomes remain uneven and accountability pressures increase, Montessori must demonstrate both rigor and results in ways that are legible to policymakers, researchers, and families, particularly those from historically marginalized communities (Debs, 2019). By entering the conversation with clarity and evidence, Montessori can help shift the field beyond entrenched divisions and toward a more coherent, impactful, and inclusive vision of literacy.



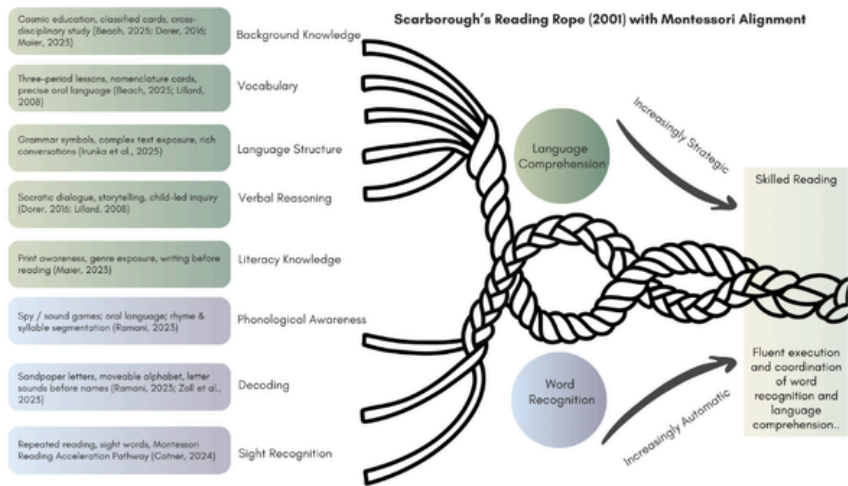
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Appendix A

An alignment of Montessori materials and practices with the strands of Scarborough's Reading Rope.



Adapted from Scarborough, H.S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for Research in Early Literacy* (pp. 97 – 110). New York: Guilford Press

Note. Graphic from Scarborough's Reading Rope (Landmark School Outreach Program, 2022), based on the reading model developed by Scarborough (2001).



*Through research we illuminate the path to
unlocking every child's potential.*

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