



AMS Research Digest

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A Note from the Research Editor

This third issue of the Montessori Research Digest turns attention to a question that reaches across teacher preparation, school leadership, and professional practice: How do we sustain educators as they continue to grow?

The articles in this volume examine coaching, mentorship, induction, reflective practice, and inclusive preparation as dimensions of adult learning. Together, they invite us to consider preparation of the adult not as something completed with a credential, but as an ongoing professional journey.

For Montessori schools, teacher education programs, and leaders, the research offers an opportunity to examine how we create conditions in which educators can deepen their practice, strengthen their confidence, and remain connected to their professional purpose.

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Sustaining Montessori Educators: Adult Learning as a Lever for Retention and Practice

This volume of the Montessori Research Digest examines adult learning and professional development as important contributors to teacher retention and sustained professional practice. Rather than treating retention only as a staffing challenge, this issue explores how educators are sustained through meaningful learning conditions that build competence, confidence, connection, and professional identity.

Current research suggests that teachers are more likely to remain in the field when professional learning is consistent, practice-based, collaborative, and supported by timely feedback and coaching. These conditions help educators navigate classroom complexity, strengthen

instructional effectiveness, and experience growth in ways that are visible and meaningful.

From a Montessori lens, this topic is especially relevant. Montessori teacher formation has long emphasized observation, guided practice, reflection, mentorship, and preparation of the adult. These elements align closely with broader research on effective adult learning and offer a powerful framework for understanding how Montessori schools can support teacher development and long-term commitment. Together, the studies in this volume invite us to view preparation of the adult not as a discrete stage, but as a professional continuum extending from teacher education into induction, mentorship, coaching, reflective leadership, and ongoing practice.

Supporting the Preparation of the Adult Through Montessori Coaching

Review written by Emily Yerington, Doctoral Student

The preparation of the adult does not end with a certificate. The first years in the classroom ask a guide to keep observing, practicing, and reflecting, usually while managing everything else a new community demands. Murray, Daoust, and Mallett (2021) developed the Montessori Coaching Tool Elementary (MCT-EL) rubric to give early-career guides and their mentors a shared language for that work.

The content of the rubric was developed using Maria Montessori's writings, Montessori organizational standards, research on Montessori implementation, and the authors' years in Elementary classrooms and teacher education. They then piloted their assessment for a year in an AMS teacher education program and revised through feedback at MACTE and AMS gatherings. This study took the next step. The authors invited 32 experienced Elementary teacher educators to review the tool, and 18 responded. All held Elementary credentials, all had spent at least six years in Montessori classrooms, and half had been teacher educators for more than 25 years. Because the rubric is long, each reviewer looked closely at about one-third of it.

Support was strong. Three quarters of the experts strongly agreed the rubric would be useful for developing teachers, and another 19 percent somewhat agreed. Ninety-four percent agreed it covered the most important practices. Reviewers pointed to its breadth, its organization, its grounding in Montessori philosophy, and its developmental shape. One valued that a guide could see not only where practice stands but what

growth toward the next level would look like.

Reviewers were also able to provide feedback about what needed work. Several words carried a frame of mind that did not match the prepared environment. For example, If the child's work is self-construction, when is a child off task? Language such as "permits" and "allows" places the adult as the keeper of knowledge. Reviewers also questioned whether every progression moved along a single continuum, and suggested that the guide be revised so that it doesn't define a new guide by what they lack.

The authors revised accordingly. "Overview" became "Awareness;" "Redirection" became "Guidance;" and "Conduct" became "Development." Every indicator in the first column was rewritten in positive terms. They expanded from 70 practices to 81, adding collaboration with the classroom assistant, educational differentiation, home and school partnership, technology, implicit bias, social justice goals, and self-care. The refined rubric, printed in the article's appendix and available for use, describes 81 practices across six components at four levels of development. The idea is that coaching should be a conversation about growth, not a judgment about worth.

Murray, A. K., Daoust, C. J., & Mallett, J. (2021). Designing the Montessori Coaching Tool Elementary rubric for early-career professional development. *Journal of Montessori Research*, 7(2), 25-61.

FOUR STRATEGIES FOR PRACTICE

- Keep it formative. No scores are attached, and the tool was not built for appraisal, promotion, or decisions about retention. Say that plainly before the first conversation.
- Reflect separately, then compare. Guide and mentor each other to consider the same few practices before meeting. Agreement affirms growth. A difference gives the conversation somewhere useful to go.
- Take one section at a time. An observer might attend presentations on one visit and the social and emotional environment on the next, then settle with the guide on a single next step.
- Return to it across the year. Development in a Montessori classroom is gradual and hard to see from inside a demanding week. Revisiting the same practices over time makes progression visible.

Preparing Montessori Teachers for Every Child: A Program-Wide Approach to Inclusion

Review written by Dr. Natalie Danner

This case study examines how one Early Childhood teacher preparation program systematically redesigned its curriculum to integrate inclusive teacher preparation standards across courses rather than treating inclusion as a standalone topic. Through faculty collaboration, curriculum mapping, and alignment of assignments with professional standards, the authors present a dynamic model for continuous program improvement. As a single-program case study, the article is not intended to produce broadly generalizable findings; rather, it offers a practical model that other teacher preparation programs can adapt within their own contexts.

What if a Montessori TEP took a look at their program and individual courses as a whole and redesigned with an eye toward inclusion? Although the authors do not specifically discuss Montessori teacher education, their process offers a useful framework that Montessori TEPs could adapt when examining how inclusion is addressed across their curriculum.

Today, many Montessori and traditional teachers report needing help serving children with challenging behaviors, developmental delays, disabilities, and neurodivergence. Long (2022) posited that children with disabilities make up 3.75% of children in Montessori 0-3 classrooms and 8.49% of children in Montessori 3-6 classrooms. These findings reinforce that Montessori teachers routinely serve children with disabilities and developmental delays. Research and anecdotal reports suggest that many Montessori teachers feel underprepared to work with these children and their families.

Many Montessori credentialed teachers struggle in their first few years with the added challenge of inclusion. These teachers then try to find an additional graduate degree in special education, the AMS Montessori Inclusion Endorsement (MIE), or another type of professional development program to fill in the gaps of their Montessori teacher education program.

As forward-thinking teacher educators, we could be proactive and integrate some of the newest Early Intervention / Early Childhood Special Education standards (for children ages 0-8) or the 2020 Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators (Initial K-12 Standards) from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) into Montessori teacher education programs from the beginning. Program-wide alignment reinforces the expectation that Montessori schools serve all children, including those with disabilities. Additionally, when Montessori teacher education programs provide essential inclusive strategies and case study scenarios focused on children with disabilities or suspected disabilities, TEP faculty are being responsive to teachers' daily experiences and struggles. This emphasis on inclusion also aligns with the historical roots of Montessori education, which began with Maria Montessori's work with children who had disabilities. Integrating inclusive practices into Montessori teacher preparation may better support novice teachers and could contribute to improved teacher confidence and retention.

In this way, Montessori teachers would be well prepared, confident, and competent in serving a wide range of children's developmental needs and know when and how to reach out to and collaborate with specialists for evaluation, therapeutic services, and support. Better preparation may reduce teacher stress, which in turn has the potential to decrease burnout and improve teacher retention (Lillard et al. 2025). For district leaders working within accountability systems, these results position Montessori not only as philosophically coherent, but also as demonstrably aligned with standardized outcome metrics that shape public narratives and resource allocation.

La Croix, L., Kidd, J. K., Walter, H., Stone, D., Ferguson, D., Fisher-Maltese, C., ... Vesely, C. (2023). A dynamic process model for continued integration between ECE and EI/ECSE teacher preparation programs. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 44(2), 216–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2023.2194246>

INSIGHT SNAPSHOT

- For teacher educators, it offers a practical model for curriculum review and program redesign.
- For Montessori practitioners, it highlights the importance of receiving preparation that reflects the realities of today's inclusive classrooms.
- For researchers, it suggests how similar redesign efforts influence teacher confidence, instructional practices, and child outcomes within Montessori settings.

Sustaining Montessori Teachers Through Reflective Mentorship

Review written by Dr. Vanessa M. Rigaud

Saylor, McKenzie, and Sacco's article "Teacher-Centered Mentorship as Meaningful Professional Montessori Development" offers a strong Montessori-specific contribution to how professional development can support teacher growth, efficacy, and retention. Published in the *Journal of Montessori Research* in 2018, the study examines an eight-month program for Montessori Early Childhood and Elementary teachers that integrated mindfulness, reflective practice, and teacher-centered mentorship. Its value lies in shifting away from one-time professional development sessions toward a sustained, relational, practice-embedded model of adult learning.

The study explored how teachers experienced a model built around three interrelated practices: mindfulness, structured reflection, and teacher-centered mentorship (also described as clinical supervision). The authors asked how teachers experienced the program, how they applied new learning, and whether they believed their practice improved. This framing is especially relevant in Montessori contexts, where teachers are trained to observe, guide, and individualize instruction to support children's development. Yet, adult professional learning is not always designed with the same intentionality.

Using a qualitative case study design, the researchers studied five teachers: three Elementary and two preschool/kindergarten at an independent Montessori school in a diverse Midwestern suburb. Data were collected through quick writes, weekly check-in surveys, researcher observations, and teacher vignettes. The program required teachers to identify a classroom challenge, practice mindfulness and reflection, observe and mentor one another, and return to the challenge through follow-up conversations, making the work concrete, cyclical, and grounded in daily practice rather than abstract.

Four themes emerged in this study. First, mindfulness-grounded reflection and mentorship helped teachers slow down and approach challenges with less judgment. Second, the model built communities of trust, with teachers reporting greater connection and a willingness to engage in honest conversations about practice. Third, structure and focus mattered: concentrating on one challenge at a time helped teachers move from general concern to targeted action. Fourth, supportive accountability helped sustain change, as peer observation and follow-up conversations created a culture of encouragement paired with gentle accountability to one's own goals.

Although the study did not directly measure retention, it offers a retention-adjacent insight: teachers are more likely to stay engaged when professional development strengthens their sense of efficacy, belonging, and professional agency. Retention, the article suggests, is shaped not only by compensation, workload, or staffing conditions, but also by whether teachers experience themselves as growing professionals within a trustworthy adult-learning community.

The study's limitations, which included a small sample, single-school setting, and reliance on teacher perception are worth noting, but its contribution remains meaningful. It offers a Montessori-aligned model that treats teachers as reflective practitioners rather than passive recipients of training. For schools and organizations concerned with retention, the article's implication is clear: sustaining teachers requires more than keeping them in classrooms — it requires building conditions in which they feel seen, supported, challenged, and capable of continued growth.

Saylor, L. L., McKenzie, G. K., & Sacco, C. C. (2018). Teacher-centered mentorship as meaningful professional Montessori development. *Journal of Montessori Research*, 4(2), 10–32.

KEY INSIGHTS FOR LEADERSHIP

- **Embed professional development in daily practice.** Teachers grow when professional development (PD) is connected to real classroom challenges, observation, reflection, and follow-up. Leaders should design PD as an ongoing cycle, not a one-time event.
- **Build trust before accountability.** Teachers are more open to growth when mentorship happens in a culture of respect and psychological safety. Supportive accountability helps teachers feel strengthened rather than judged.
- **Focus on one meaningful growth area at a time.** The study shows that focused support helps teachers see progress without feeling overwhelmed. Program directors can strengthen retention by helping teachers name, practice, and recognize their own growth.

Creating the Conditions for Reflective Practice

Review written by Dr. Andee Blackwell

The need for this study emerged when the researchers observed that Montessori school leaders were comfortable conducting classroom observations but often struggled to provide timely, reflective feedback that supported teacher growth. Rather than examining formal teacher evaluation, the study explored how a structured coaching protocol could strengthen instructional supervision by fostering self-reflection in school leaders and meaningful reflective dialogue with teachers.

Using a multicase, phenomenological design, the researchers studied Montessori instructional leaders, including heads of school, coaches, and curriculum coordinators, as they implemented an eight-question coaching protocol following classroom observations. The study included 12 Montessori leaders from six schools across the United States. The findings showed that the protocol encouraged leaders to reflect on their own supervisory practices, build stronger relationships with teachers, and shift from evaluative conversations toward collaborative coaching. Three themes emerged: leaders' personal reflection, leading reflective practice through adult learning principles, and using reflection to support school improvement. Because this was a small qualitative study focused on leaders' reported experiences, the findings are best understood as practice-based insights into reflective leadership rather than broadly generalizable conclusions.

Effective Montessori leadership begins with the leader's own reflective practice. Maria Montessori emphasized that leaders must continually prepare themselves through observation, study, and self-reflection before guiding others. Leaders are most successful when they build

trusting relationships that recognize and honor teacher autonomy, using thoughtful questions rather than prescriptive feedback to encourage professional growth. Ultimately, the Montessori school leader's role mirrors that of the Montessori guide: observing carefully, listening intentionally, and nurturing adults through meaningful dialogue that empowers them to take ownership of their practice and contribute to a culture of continuous improvement.

The authors suggest that effective Montessori leadership depends on trust, dialogue, and respect for teacher autonomy. Leaders who model reflective practice are better equipped to cultivate it in others, creating a professional culture focused on continuous learning rather than compliance. Participants also recognized the challenges of balancing the roles of evaluator and coach, noting that meaningful reflection requires relationships built on trust rather than judgment. This tension reflects the complexity of Montessori instructional leadership, as school leaders often move among the roles of administrator, evaluator, supervisor, mentor, and coach. The study also situates reflective practice within the broader responsibility of school leaders to support adult learning and their own continued professional development.

Overall, the study offers a useful practice-based perspective on how structured reflection can strengthen leadership capacity, teacher learning, and a schoolwide culture of continuous improvement.

Damore, S., & Rieckhoff, B. (2021). Leading reflective practices in Montessori schools. *Journal of Montessori Research*, 7(1), 51–65. <https://doi.org/10.17161/jomr.v7i1.14832>

LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

Leaders must model reflection first.

- Reflective school cultures begin when leaders consistently examine their own assumptions, decisions, and supervisory practices.

Questions can be more powerful than directives.

- Thoughtful coaching questions help teachers analyze their own practice and develop greater ownership of professional growth.

Trust is essential for meaningful feedback.

- Reflective dialogue is strongest when teachers experience supervision as relational and developmental rather than primarily evaluative.

Reflection can become a school-wide improvement strategy.

- When reflective practice is embedded in leadership and coaching, it can strengthen adult learning, collaboration, and continuous improvement across the school.

From Orientation to Professional Belonging: Supporting Novice Teachers Through Induction

Review written by Dr. Vanessa M. Rigaud

The transition from teacher preparation to full responsibility for a classroom can be demanding. Novice teachers must develop instructional expertise, learn organizational expectations, build relationships with students and families, and respond to the daily pressures of school life. Keese and colleagues (2023) examined whether formal induction and mentoring programs meaningfully support teachers during this critical stage.

The authors conducted a meta-analysis of 17 studies published between 2010 and 2019. The studies examined formalized induction or mentoring programs for novice PK–12 teachers and used experimental, quasi-experimental, or correlational designs. Outcomes included teacher retention, professional growth, instructional effectiveness, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and student achievement.

Across the studies, formal induction and mentoring produced positive, statistically significant effects for teachers and students. The effects were modest but evident across retention, teacher outcomes, and student achievement. The authors reported an overall effect size of 0.166 for intervention studies and 0.273 for correlational studies. These findings suggest that induction is worthwhile, while cautioning against viewing it as a singular solution to teacher attrition or instructional improvement.

For Montessori schools, the study raises an important question: What happens after a teacher earns a Montessori credential and enters the classroom? Montessori teacher education programs provide extensive preparation in philosophy, child development, observation, materials, and instructional practice. Yet novice guides must still learn to translate that preparation into a functioning classroom community. They must refine lesson presentation, classroom

leadership, recordkeeping, family communication, environmental design, differentiation, and collaboration with assistants and specialists.

A formal Montessori induction program could bridge credential preparation and sustained professional practice. Such a program might include a trained mentor, regular observation and reflection, protected meeting time, assistance with classroom systems, and opportunities to examine student work and developmental needs. The purpose should not be to monitor or remediate the novice guide, but to strengthen confidence, judgment, professional belonging, and Montessori practice.

The article also emphasizes that assigning a mentor is not the same as building an induction system. Because the studies included varied models, settings, and measures, the research does not identify one universally effective approach. Schools must therefore consider mentor quality, program intensity, available time, alignment with teacher needs, and organizational conditions.

For Montessori organizations, induction should be understood as part of the preparation of the adult. A credential marks an important threshold, but professional formation continues through supported experience. Structured, relational, and practice-based induction may strengthen teacher development, improve classroom practice, and increase the likelihood that promising educators remain in the profession.

Keese, J., Thompson, C. G., Waxman, H. C., McIntush, K., & Svajda-Hardy, M. (2023). A worthwhile endeavor? A meta-analysis of research on formalized novice teacher induction programs. *Educational Research Review*, 38, Article 100505. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100505>

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR MONTESSORI TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Extend preparation beyond credential completion.

Treat teacher formation as a continuum that includes coursework, practicum, induction, mentoring, and early-career professional development.

Build formal partnerships with employing schools.

Coordinate with schools to provide Montessori-specific mentoring, observation, reflective coaching, and protected support during graduates' first years.

Prepare candidates to use feedback developmentally.

Teach adult learners how to reflect on practice, seek support, interpret observation evidence, and engage productively in mentoring rather than viewing feedback as evaluation.

Researcher's Comments

Across the five articles reviewed in this volume, a shared question emerges: What kinds of professional learning environments make it more possible for teachers to grow, remain engaged, and continue in the field?

The research suggests that retention may be influenced not only by teachers' commitment, but also by whether professional learning feels meaningful, relational, practice-based, and connected to their development as capable professionals. This invites school leaders, teacher education program directors, and coaches to examine how adult learning is experienced within their own settings.

The broader research on effective professional development raises questions about the limits of episodic workshops. What changes when learning includes sustained collaboration, coaching, modeling, feedback, reflection, and direct classroom application? Could professional development become more fully integrated into a school's instructional and organizational life?

The research on induction and mentoring extends this inquiry. How are new and developing educators supported as they move from preparation into the complexity of daily practice?

Informal encouragement has value, but structured mentoring, coaching, and induction may offer stronger support as teachers build confidence, interpret challenges, and remain connected to the purpose of their work. These questions are especially relevant in Montessori settings, where educators are developing both technical skill and philosophical understanding.

The Montessori-focused studies highlight reflection, observation, mindfulness, mentorship, and guided practice as important dimensions of adult preparation. They invite us to consider whether professional learning addresses only materials and procedures, or also supports reflective judgment, responsiveness, and confidence.

Taken together, these articles do not offer a single formula for retention. Instead, they invite closer examination of the systems surrounding teacher growth.

For school leaders, TEP directors, and coaches, the opportunity is to ask how intentionally educators are supported after initial preparation, and how those supports might strengthen both professional practice and the likelihood that teachers remain and grow in the field.

Get in Touch

We invite you to explore the American Montessori Society Research webpage to access a wealth of resources that support your professional journey.

Find current research articles, mini-grants and scholarships, white papers, and more—designed to deepen your understanding and strengthen your practice.

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