Susan Holmes

Omega Graduate School

Dr. Sean Taladay

July 12, 2023

**100-Day – Literature Review**

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

**Introduction**

The Montessori Method is a well-established educational system operating successfully for over 100 years worldwide. Despite its success, the Montessori Method is not without controversy, especially among parents. Parents tend to want the kind of programs they are familiar with, the factory model system, for example. Where all the children sit at desks in rows. The United States and Europe adopted this factory model system about 150 years ago, and grading was added in the early 1900s (Lillard, 2018, p. 1). It took Maria Montessori over a half-century to develop her program with the “expressed purpose of helping children thrive to their full potential, rather than pass tests (Lillard, 2018, p. 1).” She worked on three continents and crossed social classes, with her different approach to educating children from birth to university (Lillard, 2018, p. 1).

Historically, Montessori has been popular in private schools, especially in early childhood, and is often considered a program for the elite (Brown & Lewis, 2017, p. 1). Since the 1990s, the Montessori Method has been in public schools, albeit not many, proving that it is a program for all children, even ethnic ones. However, ethnic families are influenced by their social backgrounds and tend to feel that Montessori is not for their children (Debs & Brown, 2017, p. 8). This writer has heard and defended several arguments as a fellow educator among educators against the Montessori Method. For example, “Montessori is a program that allows students to play or pretend to be adults, and why do they need to know how to sweep and clean up behind themselves?” Another argument this writer has heard from other educators is, “I do not think it has enough structure for children today.” Another argument this writer has heard educators of color frequently give is, “Montessori is for white kids; black parents will never accept that program.” While the literature confirms the Montessori philosophy and the Montessori educational experiences often occur within affluent communities, it is up to Montessori educators to educate all parents (Burbank et al., 2020, p. 1).

Regardless of color, Montessori educators must change the perception that this program cannot deliver an academically rigorous and culturally responsive education (Debs & Brown, 2017, p. 8). Ethnic families may be more comfortable with a traditional approach because there is minimal literature regarding public knowledge of the Montessori philosophy and pedagogy (Summers, 2022, p. 17). Therefore, this literature review will present the Montessori Method's origin, controversy, and success. It will also prove that Montessori Pre-K through adult or only Pre-K is a great educational program for people of color, low-income families, and socioeconomically disadvantaged families. The Montessori Method is unique, requiring faith in the process, the educators, and the children. Montessori is a college-preparatory program that is innovative, bold, complex, and authentic. The Montessori Program embodies the woman that developed it.

**The Development of the Montessori Method**

Dr. Maria Montessori, engineer, scientist, physician, psychiatrist, and educator who, over 100 years ago, developed the educational model that bears her name, was born in 1870 in Italy. Remarkably, her life spanned the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (Gutek, 1995, p. 282). An only child, she was raised by educated middle-class parents who doted on her and supported her thirst for knowledge (Gutek, 1995, p. 294). During her youth, she studied mathematics, science, and technology (Gutek, 1995, p. 282). As a woman during that period, expected to become an educator, she aspired to become an engineer. She attended engineering school for several years. Later, she became a physician and was the first woman admitted to the University of Rome’s School of Medicine (Gutek, 1995, p. 294).

During her last two years of medical school, Maria Montessori developed an interest in early childhood education and did clinical observations at the Children’s Pediatric Hospital. Here, she learned the importance of observations and made them a primary part of her work (Gutek, 1995, p. 295). After becoming a physician, she opened up her practice and joined the University San Giovanni Hospital staff when she was 26 (Gutek, 1995, p. 295). The following year, she accepted an appointment at the University of Rome’s Clinica Pssichiatrica, assisting Dr. Clodomiro Bonfigli, a noted specialist in treating children with mental disabilities (Gutek, 1995, pp. 295-296). This appointment found her visiting Rome’s insane asylums where many children, labeled as “mentally deficient” and “idiotic,” were brought to her awareness (Gutek, 1995, p. 296). She specialized in neuropsychology and supported the establishment of medical-pedagogical institutes for rehabilitating developmentally disabled children (Murray et al., 2023, p. 7). These institutes wanted more professional care for children locked up in mental hospitals. Maria Montessori and her colleague Giuseppe Montesano did just that at the Roman psychiatric clinic (Murray et al., 2023, p. 7). Eventually, they opened an Orthophrenic School and teacher training center for mentally disabled children in Rome (Murray et al., 2023, p. 8).

During that time, she realized that treatment plans for these children would require a combination of medicine, psychology, and pedagogy. Researching a treatment plan for the children led her to the works of Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard and Edouard Sequin, two known French physicians and psychologists of that time (Murray et al., 2023, p. 8).

Dr. Itard and Dr. Sequin worked with special needs children. Dr. Itard worked with the deaf and hard of hearing; in Dr. Sequin’s work, developmentally challenged students used hands-on didactic tools that he invented, “systematically and analytically stimulating the senses and thus strengthening cognitive capacity (Murray et al., 2023, p. 8).” In her study of special needs children, she combined Sequin’s work with hers, adding to his tools and designing several of her own.

Later, Dr. Montessori turned to anthropology as it related to the school environment. She began to study under Giuseppe Sergi, who became her mentor. Sergi was an anthropologist and psychologist during the age of positivism. He argued that “remedies against the spread of degeneration included not only radical and repressive measures but also the improvement of popular education and the living conditions of the working class (Cerro, 2017, p. 1).” Dr. Montessori researched schoolchildren to establish a connection between school performance, social status, and physiological factors like craniometrical measures (Murray et al., 2023, p. 8). Because of her studies, she earned another degree in anthropology. One that enabled her to give lectures on the subject matter. She was a brilliant scientist ahead of her time, establishing a connection between special needs children and general education students. “Like Sergi, she believed it was possible to counteract degenerative influences, social as well as biological, through rational methods of primary education strengthening cognitive capacity (Babini & Lama, 2000; Quarfood, 2005) (Murray et al., 2023, p. 8).” Therefore, when asked to open a school to support the working-class children living in the housing project in the Roman slum district of San Lorenzo, she jumped at the opportunity (Murray et al., 2023, p. 8). She was given one of the more prominent apartments in the project, and Montessori’s first school, Casa de Bambini, or Children’s House, opened its doors on January 6, 1907, she was 36 years old (Murray et al., 2023, p. 8). The Montessori Method, known today, was established with about 50 impoverished preschool children in Rome (Lillard et al., 2006, p. 1). Ironically, Dr. Montessori inadvertently became precisely what women of her time were supposed to become, an educator. Thank goodness, because her method of educating children is brilliant bar none, at least that is this writer's opinion.

**Montessori’s Methodology**

The Montessori Method is a pedagogical approach to teaching children based on their development ages: (1) from birth to age six; (2) from ages six to 12; (3) from ages 12-18 (Gutek, 1995, p. 302). She began with what she referred to as the prepared environment. The furnishings and materials used were designed to accommodate children’s physical size (Hudson, 2023, p. 18). Montessori education is children centered, and the conceptual framework used in a Montessori classroom focuses on self-guided learning and self-discovery (Hudson, 2023, p. 19). There are several components of a Montessori classroom that differ from the traditional classroom, and that is the multiage groupings that foster peer learning, uninterrupted blocks of work time, and guided choice of work activities derived from the Directress’s (teacher) observations of following the child (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 1). The teachers observe so they will know how to support the child’s development. Montessori pedagogy uses the classroom environment as another teacher. No extrinsic rewards are offered or grades assigned (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 1). In addition, children are encouraged to obtain their learning by using the hands-on Montessori materials that are within reach of the children, carefully arranged on shelves to be aesthetically pleasing or capture the child's attention (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 1). The students are encouraged to explore their interests. The teachers, authentically trained in the Montessori Method, provide special lessons in a spiraling and successive curriculum using the prepared materials, many of which were developed by Maria Montessori (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 1). Teachers are trained to respect every child, treating each one regardless of race as the wonderment that they are mindful of the developmental process and their interconnectedness to all life (Lillard et al., 2023, p. 2).

**The Montessori Method’s Effect on Students of Color and Low-income Families**

It is no secret that education has always been associated with the success of socioeconomically disenfranchised students in improving their quality of life. Research regarding the Montessori Method indicates that it significantly improves the achievement level of children of color. The research also indicates that when the Montessori Method is not applied with fidelity, it affects student achievement levels. However, if applied with fidelity, are public Montessori schools capable of supporting culturally and ethnically diverse communities to succeed academically? The quality of Montessori is always in question in every study because all or very little of her system can be implemented. “Quality entails teachers adequately trained with the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) certifications, which Montessori founded to carry on her work, is the definition of taught with fidelity (Lillard, 2018, p. 4).” However, many educators are also trained with the American Montessori Society (AMS) certification (Belcher, 2015, p. 87). The issues surrounding the implementation of the Montessori Method with fidelity are a concern. Lillard (2018) speaks to a study conducted by Else-Quest & Lillard (2006), where they compared 5- and 12-year-olds in a public AMI Montessori school with children in other schools (p. 4). The results were that the Montessori students not only performed better on the academic assessments but also engaged in more positive shared peer play and possessed a more robust, healthier sense of school community (Lillard, 2018, p. 4). The early works by Debs and Brown (2017) examined the benefits of the Montessori Method for students of color in public Montessori schools (p. 1). Their research found that Montessori education offered both opportunities and limitations for students of color in attending diverse schools, developing executive functions, achieving academically, accessing early childhood education, and culturally responsive education, minimizing racially disproportionate discipline, and limiting overidentification for special education (Debs & Brown, 2017, p. 1). In addition, the research by Deb and Brown (2017) identified that over the last 40 years, public Montessori schools have expanded exponentially to over 500 schools serving approximately 125,000 students (p. 2). This data is significant because, in a survey of 300 of these public Montessori schools in 2012-2013, 54% of students were students of color, comprising Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, and multiracial students (Debs & Brown, 2017, p. 2). They concluded that although Montessori has positively affected students of color in many of the areas above, e.g., developed executive functions, academic achievement, and access to early childhood education, further research into their experiences in Montessori schools is still needed (Debs & Brown, 2017, p. 2). In addition to promoting the effectiveness of the Montessori Method, Debs and Brown (2017) believe the research that involves how students of color experience Montessori will provide educators and policymakers with additional information needed to effectively identify areas of improvement and Montessori’s strengths (p. 2).

Additional work by Brown and Lewis (2017) involved a quasi-experimental study comparing Montessori public programs with other magnet schools in an urban setting in North Carolina from 2007 to 2014 (p. 1). Their study examined the outcomes of six schools' end-of-grade state reading and math tests for African American third-grade Montessori students at the lower elementary level of public Montessori schools and three other magnet schools (Brown & Lewis, 2017, p. 1). Lower elementary in Montessori schools refer to students ages 6-9 or grades 1-3. In public schools, state academic achievement testing begins in the third grade. Montessori advocates like Brown and Lewis (2017) believe their research can address many concerns surrounding American schools, including their failure to serve students of color adequately (p. 1). It found higher reading test performance and equal math test performance for the students in Montessori schools. However, this study was limited to just a few magnet schools. They believe more research is needed in this area (Brown & Lewis, 2017, p. 1). However, one of the most critical public Montessori education research studies was conducted in the United States between 2011 and 2016 (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 1). The South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, the Riley Institute, with support from the Self Family Foundation, completed a multi-year mixed-method comprehensive study to examine and evaluate how Montessori impacts South Carolina’s public Montessori schools (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 1). When the study ended in the 2015-16 academic year, 7,402 students participated in a public Montessori program in 45 different schools across 24 districts in South Carolina, making South Carolina a state that has more public Montessori programs than any other state in the country, except California (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 2). However, this study only considered those schools whose students met a minimum level of fidelity, as indicated by a rubric designed for the study (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 2). When the researchers investigated the schools, they included the following criteria in their study:

The extent to which schools implemented Montessori with fidelity, the demographic makeup of public school Montessori students, the effect of Montessori education on academic and behavioral outcomes, the impact of Montessori education on creativity, social skills, work habits, executive function, and Montessori teacher’s perspectives on job satisfaction, and the challenge of Montessori in the public sector (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 1).

Although the results concluded that students in public Montessori schools across the state are faring well compared to similar non-Montessori public schools, equally noteworthy is that 61% of South Carolina’s programs are in Title 1 schools (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 7). Title 1 schools typically serve students of color who are still underrepresented in public Montessori schools. The low-income Montessori students scored significantly higher than non-Montessori students in ELA, math, and social studies. Approximately 55% of Montessori students are white, 34% are black, and 10% are Hispanic (Culclasure et al., 2018, p. 1). This study attempts to fill in some necessary research gaps focusing on public Montessori education. However, according to Lillard et al. (2023), because Montessori schools are typically choice schools, which means parents chose Montessori schools among an array of options, there is no way to know if the characteristics of parents who choose public Montessori schools differ in ways that may directly cause different outcomes (p. 4). In other words, parents that choose public Montessori are set apart from parents that will send their children to the neighborhood school, which happens to be a public Montessori school. This extensive study covered several gaps needed in research concerning Montessori and people of color. However, it does not negate what many of the studies mentioned above have made aware, that the Montessori Method significantly supports academic achievement, albeit in the majority of elementary schools, for people of color and, in so doing, provides opportunities for people of color to continue towards higher-level academia. This supports the research that people with higher levels of education increase their chances significantly of obtaining gainful employment free from poverty.

If education is a tangible option for socioeconomically challenged students to succeed, educators must advocate for these students. They must educate and inform their parents of this proven method to educate their children, especially educators of color. Academic success leads to monetary gain and an opportunity for a better life. Montessori provides access to a better, more holistic way of learning and gives all students positive attitudes towards school, independence, and self-esteem. It provides educators with a sense of accomplishment and the knowledge and joy that comes from affecting their students' lives beyond the classroom. This is why many teachers became educators, and it aligns with what Dr. Maria Montessori set out to do over 100 years ago; she stated, “It is not true,” says Dr. Montessori, “that I invented what is called the Montessori Method. I have studied the child, I have taken what the child has given me and expressed it, and that is what is called the Montessori Method (*Who Was Maria Montessori?* n.d.).”

Works Cited

Belcher, K. A. (2015). *Policy reservations: Early childhood workforce registries and alternative pedagogy teacher preparation* [Ph.D., Indiana University]. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1729124894/abstract/AE621A26B03F4B62PQ/1

Brown, K., & Lewis, C. W. (2017). A comparison of reading and math achievement for African American third-grade students in Montessori and other magnet schools. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *86*(4), 439–448.

Burbank, M. D., Goldsmith, M. M., Spikner, J., & Park, K. (2020). Montessori education and a neighborhood school: A case study of two early childhood education classrooms. *Journal of Montessori Research*, *6*(1), 1–18.

Cerro, G. (2017). Giuseppe Sergi. The portrait of a positivist scientist. *Journal of Anthropological Sciences = Rivista Di Antropologia: JASS*, *95*, 109–136. https://doi.org/10.4436/JASS.95007

Culclasure, B. T., Fleming, D. J., & Riga, G. (2018). An Evaluation of Montessori Education in South Carolina’s public schools. In *Online Submission*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED622145

Debs, M., & Brown, K. (2017). Students of color and public Montessori schools: A review of the literature. *Journal of Montessori Research*, *3*, 1. https://doi.org/10.17161/jomr.v3i1.5859

Gutek, G. L. (1995). *A history of the Western educational experience: Third edition*. Waveland Press.

Hudson, L. (2023). *An investigation of Montessori education efficacy versus the traditional general education classrooms for improved achievement* [D.Ed., Southern Wesleyan University]. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2766709220/abstract/B00CF270BA184AA9PQ/1

Lillard, A., & Else-Quest, N. (2006). Evaluating Montessori Education. *Science*, *313*(5795), 1893–1894. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1132362

Lillard, A. S. (2018). Rethinking education: Montessori approach. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *27*(6), 395–400. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721418769878

Lillard, A. S., Tong, X., & Bray, P. M. (2023). Seeking Racial and ethnic parity in preschool outcomes: An exploratory study of public Montessori schools vs. business-as-usual schools. *Journal of Montessori Research*, *9*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.17161/jomr.v9i1.19540

Murray, A., Ahlquist, E.M. T., McKenna, M., & Debs, M. (2023). *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Montessori Education*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Summers, H. (2022). *Hybrid Montessori education: Teacher reflections on the care and education of under-served black children* [Ed.D., DePaul University]. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2671606105/abstract/73DC8C71CC7A4DD1PQ/1

*Who Was Maria Montessori?* (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2023, from https://amshq.org/About-Montessori/History-of-Montessori/Who-Was-Maria-Montessori