

# Montessori in today's A

This issue's 'International' section article links back to the research theme of issue 109, with **Keith Whitescarver** providing a report on Montessori research in the US.

**R**esearch on Montessori as an educational reform is beginning to get the attention that it deserves in the United States.

Currently, three substantially funded, major research projects are underway. In addition, numerous graduate students are labouring over doctoral dissertations and masters theses that explore issues surrounding key elements of Montessori pedagogy or culture.

There are several reasons for this spark of activity in the research world. First, the United States is in the midst of a "third wave" of interest in Montessori. The number of Montessori schools in both the private and public sectors is rising rapidly. The fact, however, that many of those schools are magnet or charter schools—in other words, schools in the public sector—has led to the increased scrutiny by researchers.

Second, Americans are beginning to realize that merely requiring schools and students to take standardized assessments is an insufficient method of reforming public education. At the same time, parents and teachers are growing weary of policymakers' relentless focus on test results, fearing that much that is valuable about learning is being destroyed by this single-minded approach. Montessori, consequently, is getting a second look from parents and researchers. Furthermore, media stories about the role of Montessori in the education of well-known leaders in the tech industry are fueling interest.

Third, efforts to make the Montessori movement more cohesive in the US are beginning to reap rewards. Funds for research have become available as a consequence of collaborative efforts across organizations. Funders who, previously, might have been confused over the internal Montessori divisions and feared that this was a dead-end reform, do not face that issue in the present climate.

Finally, this new research agenda is building on smaller scale efforts, which



over the past decade have made modest inroads in the fields of developmental psychology, history, and sociology. Much of this research has been undertaken with the aim of better understanding Montessori education, both because it is a longstanding presence in American education and because the elements of Montessori education (as well as how they are integrated together) are felt to have much to offer the study of teaching and learning generally. A partial bibliography of this earlier research is provided.

## What? Why? How? A Framework for Advancing Research on Montessori Education

Is it possible that history has finally caught up with Montessori? Jacqueline Cossentino, of the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, and Steve Hughes, Director of the Center for Research on Developmental Education, think the answer is yes. With funding through the Trust for

Learning, a new collaborative fund focused on developmental approaches to education, Cossentino and Hughes have launched an ambitious plan to build a framework for the study of Montessori education in the United States.

What, Why & How is a collaborative investigation designed to document the methods and outcomes of Montessori education in the United States. Over the next two years, this study will aim to answer four questions:

- Who is providing Montessori education in the United States?
- How do students who receive Montessori education perform on recognized measures of cognitive and non-cognitive skills? Specifically, how do they perform on measures of creativity, social and emotional well-being, self-regulation, collaboration and standard academic achievement?
- What are the essential features of Montessori learning environments that yield important outcomes and differentiate Montessori from



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conventional educational approaches?

- How should Montessori be practiced so that its developmental potential is fully realized?

The mixed-method study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. Co-principal investigator Jacqueline Cossentino comments “Our goal is two-fold. First, we want to be able to answer basic questions related to numbers and locations of Montessori students and schools. Second, we want to create a robust platform for documenting the outcomes of Montessori education, so that other researchers can study it.”

The project is rolling out in three phases:

## Phase 1: All School Census

Ongoing beginning  
October 2012

Comprehensive demographic data on all US Montessori schools  
Data collected through:  
On-line survey collaboratively administered through all US Montessori professional and advocacy organizations and through state and regional coalitions

## Phase 2: Measuring What Matters

October 2012 -  
August 2015

Documenting Holistic Outcomes  
Data collected through:  
1. Principal & Teacher Style Surveys  
2. Classroom Observation  
3. Alumni Survey  
4. Receiving Teacher Survey  
5. Outcomes Assessments

## Phase 3: Effective 0-6 programmes

June 2013-December 2014

Targeted Sample of Exemplary 0-6 Programs  
Data collected through:  
1. Ethnographic Case Studies of Each Program  
2. Outcomes Assessments Developed in Phase 2  
3. Cross-Case Analysis to Discern Best-Practices

Beginning with a comprehensive census of US Montessori educational programs ([www.MontessoriCensus.org](http://www.MontessoriCensus.org)),

the study will move from broad demographic analyses that addresses the “what and where” of existing Montessori programs to deeper consideration of Montessori practice and outcomes. The second stage will document the impact of Montessori education using a range of academic and developmental measures. The third phase of the project is a multi-dimensional investigation of the structure and culture of a set of exemplary programs serving families of children between 0 and 6 years and the outcomes for students enrolled in these programs.

“This grant will enable those who study Montessori education to examine large data sets to authoritatively answer key questions about the effectiveness of Montessori education,” notes co-principal investigator Steve Hughes. “For the first time, we will be able to say the extent to which Montessori education yields important outcomes for young people across a broad range of indicators.”

### All School Census

It may seem surprising that there is no authoritative count for the number of Montessori schools, but because

education in the United States is largely a local affair, and because most Montessori schools are independent, no reliable national database on Montessori schools exists. Estimates for the total number range from roughly 4,000 to 10, 000, depending on who is being asked. The goal of the all school census is for every Montessori school in the country to answer a set of questions about numbers of students, numbers of teachers, and information about Montessori practice and programming.

When completed, the census will allow all those involved in Montessori in the United States to have accurate information related to the practice of Montessori education. At completion, we will know enrolment figures, school sizes, the number of teachers and assistants, the amount of money spent on Montessori education, and programmatic insights. These statistics will be invaluable for individual Montessori schools and for the larger American educational community.

Collecting the data is a daunting task because there is at least one Montessori school in every state. Fortunately, organizations and associations across the Montessori spectrum are collaborating on the project. Recognizing the value of the effort, every major Montessori organization is working to build the largest database ever collected on the state of Montessori education. The results will provide a rich dataset that will be available to all interested parties.

### Montessori Analytics: Measuring What Matters

The Census lays the foundation for an even more ambitious effort to collect data on student outcomes of Montessori education. Over the next two years, Measuring What Matters will test a



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range of developmental outcome measures across the Montessori community in the United States.

In addition to standard measures of academic achievement, Measuring What Matters aims to track non-standard results such as perseverance and honesty, executive functions such as self-regulation, positive social development and other wide-scope developmental outcomes.

Building on a cloud-based platform established for the Census, schools will have

Montessori education on early learning and family development.

Maria Montessori was among the earliest educational reformers to identify the early years of development (birth to age six) as critical for establishing core social, emotional, physical and intellectual capacities. Today, Montessori's emphasis on the early years is increasingly validated by science, including the latest findings in brain development, language acquisition, and preventive intervention. Similarly, excellent Montessori

Minnesota, Crossway Montessori Communities, in Kensington, Maryland, East Dallas Community Schools, in Dallas Texas, and Family Star Montessori, in Denver Colorado, are the subject of an ethnographic investigation conducted by Cossentino.

While each program is unique, they hold in common several characteristics, which can produce valuable insight into best practices both within the Montessori educational movement and in wider circles of early learning, poverty amelioration, and social

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the opportunity to download suggested assessment measures and upload school-level results. At project's end, researchers will have a universal, extended evaluation framework that helps Montessori schools in the US demonstrate how their programs benefit students in areas such as social development, emotional well-being, creativity, moral and spiritual development, and advanced cognitive capabilities.

**Diving Deeply into Early Learning**

The final phase of the research project is an in-depth examination of the impact of

education can help ameliorate the social and educational effects of poverty by attending not just to children, but also to the entire family. And unlike many other reform models seeking to "close the achievement gap," Montessori education attracts and benefits families from a wide range of social, cultural and economic strata.

Currently, a small but exemplary set of programs serving vulnerable populations and focused on preventive intervention for families of children from birth to six operates in diverse locations across the US. These programs, Cornerstone Montessori, in St. Paul,

transformation. For instance, all four programs focus on serving the entire family, and make outreach to parents – from before birth – a foundational aspect of their work. How those programs meet the needs of diverse learners, partner with families, and exemplify grace, courtesy, compassion, respect, and community engagement, can provide lessons for the broader worlds of human services, education, and policy.

**Keith Whitescarver** is a historian of education and is on the Archives Committee and Research Committee of the American Montessori Society.

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