

Public Montessori as a Reform Model: Questions and Considerations for School Districts

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BACKGROUND

The public Montessori movement has been steadily growing in the United States over the last five decades. According to the Montessori Census, there are currently over 580 public schools in the US offering a Montessori program. Although only 8% of public schools in the US are charter schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), approximately half of public Montessori schools are charters (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, 2014). These charter schools have provided many more children and families with access to a tuition-free Montessori education. However, district programs are also a powerful lever for access that could greatly expand the impact of Montessori in the public sector. Why aren't there more public Montessori programs in districts? What factors do district leaders consider when they think about starting or expanding a Montessori program in their district? The answers to these questions can guide and inform the continued growth of public Montessori in district contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What questions would school district leaders need answered about a new curriculum, like Montessori, in order to consider its implementation (i.e. child outcomes data, logistics, financing, school readiness data, etc.)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

School district decision-making for student academic improvement most often occurs at the central office level and affects those at respective educational sites and settings within the district and community. Decision making for central office administrators is viewed here from different, intertwined perspectives. On one hand, school administrators make decisions based on the evidence and data that are directly related to standardized test scores and other measures of student achievement (Farley-Ripple, 2012; Park, Daly, & Guerra, 2012). On the other hand, administrators make decisions based on the values, ideologies, networks/relationships, and norms that they hold around education in their district and society as a whole (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Kochanek & Clifford, 2014). One way of observing this process is through the lens of institutional theory.

Institutional theory is a framework that focuses on institutions in society as a culture. It is a tool that will help us examine central office public school leaders' decision-making for early learning curriculum, implementation, and reforms. Institutional theory centers around the concept that institutions are ordered environments of rules, professional norms, and deeply embedded cultural elements that shape and constrain local decisions (Scott, 2001; Casto & Sipple, 2011). It also focuses on how those norms are constructed and reconstructed over time and the ways in which stability and change are influenced by social structure, culture, and norms in the environment (Scott, 2014; Wong, Coburn, & Kamel, 2020).

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METHODS

We conducted an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) where the sole objective of the case centers around understanding the perceptions of Montessori curriculum in the eyes of school district leaders. The case was bound by identifying the scope of the study: school district leaders who impact education and early learning decisions in school districts that do and do not have public Montessori programs. Therefore, the study included two sets of participants: one set of district leaders working in a school district that does not have Montessori and the other set of school district leaders who work in a district that does implement Montessori. In total, 11 leaders from eight districts participated in this study. Participants represented districts from the Southeast, West, Midwest, Northeast, and mid-Atlantic regions.

The participants agreed to virtual/remote focus group interviews. To ensure rich data collection and to affirm that the participants glean an authentic overview of the Montessori method, those participants in districts without Montessori received a literature review/expanded executive summary of the history, objectives, and effectiveness of Montessori programs on student populations. In so doing, the researchers sought to understand the path to Montessori implementation in school districts in the context of school leaders' perceptions of education curricula and choice options.

The second set of participants, those in districts with existing Montessori programs, took part in one focus group interview centered on the process, implementation, and supports that are involved with operating a Montessori program in a public school district.

Interviews lasted 45 minutes to one hour. Memos were used to supplement the researchers' understanding of the data. Interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. Using Atlas.ti, codes were grouped and refined to address the primary research question.

Figure 2
Interview Data Sources

Region	District	Status
Mid-Atlantic	Cherry Blossom Public Schools	Existing Montessori
	Rosebush Public Schools	Existing Montessori
	Bayside County	No Montessori
Southeast	Sunflower County Public Schools	Existing Montessori
	Marigold County Public Schools	Existing Montessori
Midwest	Emerald City Public Schools	New Montessori program
West	Harrington Public Schools	Existing Montessori
Northeast	Seaside Public Schools	Considered Montessori, decided not to proceed

RESULTS

When considering a new program or curriculum, like Montessori, school leaders report questions and concerns across three broad categories: **their own understanding of the program**, the **sociopolitical context** in which the decision is being made, and the **nuts and bolts** of what it would take to implement the program.



Leader Understanding	Local Context	Adoption and Implementation
Leaders describe their prior knowledge of Montessori as limited and recognize the need to educate themselves about the pedagogy	Leaders have to consider what's going on in their district and their community; how will this program fit with existing initiatives and priorities? How will the community respond?	Leaders had questions about how to provide initial Montessori training for teachers and ongoing professional development, in the context of district-wide PD initiatives
Exposure as a Montessori parent or relative is common and helpful, but limited	Funding possibilities and constraints are a significant factor	Facilities can be a barrier—when districts don't have empty classrooms, they may be hesitant to start a new Montessori program
In one case, reading a review of the literature led a district leader to recognize some of his own misconceptions and gaps in knowledge about Montessori	None of the leaders we spoke with described families as playing a significant role in decision-making around curriculum, though some described teachers' views as influential	Leaders wondered about how to best provide access to the program, given existing structures around lotteries and transportation.
<i>"I had a narrow view on children that would be more successful in Montessori programs... Montessori can be for more students than I may have anticipated initially."</i>	<i>"And when you think about bringing on a new program, especially like a Montessori approach... people think it's going to cost money because it's new."</i>	<i>"The teacher training and support for Montessori classrooms looks very different from what it looks like across the district."</i>

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, &

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the wake of the pandemic-related school closures, many leaders are rethinking schooling and considering models for how to do school differently. This study identifies key questions and considerations that district leaders have when considering Montessori as a vehicle for school transformation. District leaders in districts without Montessori programs had deeper concerns for implementing a new, innovative educational approach. This was due to a variety of structural and resource barriers that included the need to demystify what Montessori is, the lack of space for housing a new program, funding for teacher recruitment and retention, and local considerations specific to each district. Institutional theory (Scott, 2014; Wong, Coburn, & Kamel, 2020), here, did not necessarily mean the continued edification of the status quo. Rather, district leaders recognized Montessori as a viable alternative to traditional education. But with few resources for support and a lack of knowledge of what Montessori is and can do for students, **introducing this new educational approach would require a clear roadmap for assessing demand, ensuring community and district support, and guiding implementation.**

These data indicate that if the public Montessori movement is to continue to grow via district programs, outreach and education for district leaders is necessary. Though many of these leaders have an affinity for Montessori due to their own personal experiences in the private sector, these experiences are insufficient preparation for launching a program in the public sector. The local context makes a big difference in what is possible and how new programs can be launched; funding, facilities, access, and political capital are all considerations. Lastly, staffing is one of the biggest and most consistent hurdles for these programs. Supportive factors include pathways to teacher licensure for Montessori training, and Montessori teacher preparation that reflects the needs and demands of teaching in the public sector.

As with any case study, participant recruitment and participation were limited and therefore the results cannot be extrapolated to represent all US school district leaders' perceptions of Montessori. Limitations of this study include the size and scope of the case, particularly the underrepresentation of districts without existing Montessori programs. Future research could investigate the impact of providing a road map that lays out specific steps to Montessori implementation in a district context.

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