

Montessori in Action:

Building Resilient Montessori Schools

ELIZABETH G. SLADE



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MONTESSORI IN ACTION

Building Resilient Montessori Schools

ELIZABETH G. SLADE

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For Bella

*Who prompts me daily toward the work of finding and
making meaning.*

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my comfort zone and deeper into making it real. Your belief in human flourishing continues to motivate me daily.

Land Acknowledgment

The ideas shared in this book were born and cultivated in western Massachusetts, home to the Agawam and the Nonotuck, two of many Indigenous groups from Kwinitekwa, the Connecticut River Valley. This book was largely written in Belfast, Maine, overlooking the Penobscot Bay, home to the Penobscot tribe of Abenaki people. “The federal government's Indian Removal policies wrenched many Native peoples from our homelands. It separated us from our traditional knowledge and lifeways, the bones of our ancestors, our sustaining plants - but even this did not extinguish identity,” writes Robin Wall Kimmerer in her extraordinary book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. This land acknowledgment is placed here as a way to reconnect with the bones of our ancestors, to honor the land we inhabit, and to remind us to illuminate the identities of all those in our communities. I am grateful to the land and all that it has offered me in support of this work, to the Indigenous people who cared for it, and in particular to the wise Venerable Dhyani Ywahoo, who has guided and reminded me that we are all interconnected.

About the Author

Elizabeth Slade has been a Montessori educator for 35 years. She worked in both Springfield Public Schools and Hartford Public Schools building public Montessori programs, implementing systems to support all children, and developing the art of Montessori coaching. For six years, she worked at the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector supporting school start-ups, designing Child Study trainings, and bringing the Montessori coaching method to hundreds of schools across the country. Elizabeth is a founder of Public Montessori in Action, a nonprofit organization with a mission to ensure fully implemented Montessori for children, families, and educators of the global majority.

Preface

For the past 35 years I have lived inside the world of Montessori, in independent and public schools, in rural and urban areas. I found ground there that has formed me into the person I've become, and it continues to change me. I imagine by the time this book is in print I will be yet another iteration of myself with revisions to what I've shared here and still more ideas sprouting. This is the nature of impermanence and the beauty of having spent a life aligned with a method that encourages self-discovery and a commitment to bringing what we have to emerging conundrums.

My Montessori journey began in Washington, D.C., in 1986 when I entered the Washington Montessori Institute and found a new way of education – one that spoke to me as a diverse learner and made sense as a way to honor the dignity of each person. I went on to teach 6–12-year-olds in Montessori parent-teacher co-ops for the next 13 years. The students of that time taught me a great deal about learning. My training prepared me to use observation as a basis for adjusting my approach to everything, so I watched and learned. I learned about building and being part of a community, about the power of honest and open conversations and of the importance of systems to guide us in our work. The children who taught me these early lessons have their signatures in much of the work shared.

In 1999, the first public Montessori school – Alfred Zanetti School – opened in my home state of Massachusetts, and I was then introduced into a wider world of Montessori implementation. I was invited to support district teachers with six weeks of Montessori training as they worked to begin Montessori classrooms in a school that had

previously been a traditional K-5 program. The Zanetti school ended the previous year in June as a standard district school and opened in August as a Montessori school with multi-age classrooms and hands-on materials spanning children's house, lower elementary, and upper elementary. The whole community was in the midst of a radical shift. When I think back on those early days, I see now my role as a translator supporting the transition from an old way of being into a new way of being for adults and children alike. I also see that an enormous amount of energy was spent on inventing the wheel. Unlike in my career as a classroom teacher, when I had shifted schools and was able to bring the knowledge forward to the next setting with established systems in place, in this situation we had no schoolwide systems to rely on: we were starting from scratch.

Within three years the school had grown an adolescent program and had a waiting list in the hundreds. This prompted the superintendent to convert a second district school to a Montessori school: the Gerena Community School. The principal, Analida Munera, and I shifted to begin the second school while our colleague Sandra Wyner Andrew remained as principal of Zanetti. Gerena was a larger school with an ever-changing student population; because it was in an affordable neighborhood, families arriving from the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico would move into homes there and then relocate when their situation improved. Gerena was also built to reunite two neighborhoods divided by the construction of Interstate 91 and so had a public walkway tunnel running through its center. This construction, despite its many liabilities, along with families' determination and outspokenness showed me the importance of including the community in the work and life of the school.

The learners at Zanetti and Gerena taught me a great deal in those years. Their insights and frequent, often

immediate, feedback about the school allowed for the development of more inclusive ways of being. They were the inspiration for the Seamless Transitions work as well as many of the other systems, structures, and practices shared ahead.

When a new superintendent arrived in the district and redistributed the Montessori leadership into traditional programs across the city, I began my work in Hartford public schools. What initially brought me there was the child study process, which I implemented at CREC Montessori Magnet along with Jackie Cossentio and Gretchen Hall. The experience of taking something that had originated as a system in Springfield and implementing it in a new setting helped me understand the power of creating shared language and systems across schools and districts.

From there I brought the child study process to the two other public Montessori schools in the district, which quickly led to a permanent position at Annie Fisher Montessori School as an elementary coach. My work there with John Freeman, the principal, and Uma Ramani, the primary coach, allowed for an opportunity to implement the work begun in Springfield as well as to collaborate and co-create other missing components necessary to strengthen, support, and guide the work. I had not yet had the experience of working with other Montessori trained leaders with such clear vision and boundless passion for the work and this allowed us to move into full implementation of the method. Up until that time, my work was shaped by the demands of the district and the need to comply with external changes which often meant restrictions or requirements that did not serve the Montessori classrooms. Up until that time, I had known only compromise and the repeated experience of salvaging essential pieces of the program from the influx of new

regulations. As a team at Annie Fisher, we focused all of our energy on full implementation of the method without compromise as an opportunity to see if in fact it would create the results we knew were possible. And it did. In our final year together as a team the third and sixth graders at the school were outperforming their district peers.

When I was recruited by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, I joined the team, certain that this work could translate and together we spent the next six years expanding, sharing and implementing the tools, structures, and methods that had grown over the previous 14 years working in New England public Montessori schools.

The six years I spent traveling to schools across the nation brought me to work with some extraordinary people in our wider Montessori community: hard-working, determined educators who held a shared vision for fully implementing the method in a public setting with free access for children and families. The work has been developed together. The work will continue to be developed together, now including you.

PART I

Introduction

This is what is intended by education as a help to life; an education from birth that brings about a revolution: a revolution that eliminates every violence, a revolution in which everyone will be attracted towards a common center.

—Dr. Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*

An introduction is a welcome, intentional way of meeting the new through a connector. As you open this book you are meeting some new ideas and for some perhaps even a new world: the world of implementing Montessori education. Welcome to the revolution! For over 100 years, astute observers of children have known that humans are natural learners, that creativity is as common as dirt, that genius resides in every child, and that when given the chance to flourish the potential for humans to innovate and move ideas forward is infinite. Whether you are an experienced Montessori practitioner or Montessori supporter or just coming to know about this method, you are invited to join the community of educators, families, and advocates for children - a community that holds this truth at its center.

The conventional and prevalent method of education in the United States over these same 100 years posits that learning happens because of the information presented by the teacher to a child. By contrast, the Montessori method emphasizes the child's interactions with a carefully prepared environment as an aid to life. This features individual learning over whole-group instruction and fosters intrinsic motivation, opportunities for concentration

and independence, and the development of executive functioning skills. Although the impact of the method, when well implemented, has been researched and written about, the components of how to effectively implement Montessori at the school level, particularly in the public sector, have yet to be fully clarified. That is the direct aim of this work. This book is meant to serve those who are implementing Montessori: teachers, coaches, school leaders, district officials, or those who would like to begin a Montessori program. It can also be insightful for families wanting to know what goes on behind the scenes at their child's Montessori school.

Dr. Maria Montessori designed her schools to serve all children, but for historical reasons Montessori schools have often been largely reserved for the elite. Although this was neither Montessori's mission nor the context in which the method was initially developed, the majority of Montessori programs in this country are independent schools largely serving families with the means to pay for the tuition-based programs. There has consequently been no shared method for how to build sustainable Montessori institutions in the public sector. A complex and holistic model like Montessori goes against the grain of our current public education system - one designed to avoid complexity. The Montessori model requires unique autonomies and attention to structures for schools to outlast the passionate people and communities that come together to build them.

Therefore, when public school districts elect to open a district, magnet, or charter Montessori program and, in the absence of guidance, develop the school based on the needs of the other schools in the district, the foundation for the program is already working against its very nature. With a steady growth of public Montessori in this country over the past four decades and a significant rise in recent years,² this is a growing concern. Now that there are many

more schools opening, we need a unified approach to propel the work forward. At its best, the Montessori method itself is unified by a shared understanding of a rigorous approach to personalized learning grounded in carefully chosen materials and the development of community in the classroom. This means children around the world are using the same materials in the same way to move their learning forward. This is an enormous strength that is often compromised in the public sector by the wide variation in the application of the method. If we can come together and share an implementation approach, this will allow for consistency across schools that will then offer equitable Montessori programs to children regardless of background and location. The whole school Montessori method presented in this book is a cohesive approach to implementing Montessori that will build resilient and lasting schools, allowing them to provide high-quality education for children and families over time.

Montessori educators go through extensive training to understand both philosophy and materials. This means a trained person could go into any Montessori school in the world and locate any Montessori material of their choice. A non-Montessori trained head of school once watched this occur as a visiting presenter requested the constructive triangle box to use in an evening presentation after all the teachers were gone. Not knowing what she needed or where to find it himself, the head of school led her to a nearby classroom. The Montessori presenter stood at the door, surveyed the room, realized it was a primary classroom, located and crossed to the sensorial shelf, and picked up the material. He was astounded. "Have you been here before?" he asked. When she shook her head, he asked, "How did you do that?" as though it were a magic trick.

This is a magic trick we need to be able to do with whole schools. We need to all be so familiar with the shared structures of a Montessori school that we can fluidly step in and keep the strong Montessori classrooms going, keep the vibrant community connected, and continue to serve all children and adults well. What slows us down, often to a halt, in public Montessori schools is the lack of cohesive shared structures that become known and easily used by everyone, fostering independence and a greater sense of agency for all. Instead, each school is innovating its own way, with much reinvention of the wheel and some missing pieces, leaving them vulnerable to systemic disorder that may ultimately threaten the success of the program.

At the writing of this book there are 557 public Montessori schools in the United States³ serving over 150,000 children and growing. In the world of public education, however, Montessori schools are vulnerable to starting and then closing, leaving their materials locked in storage rooms – or worse, in district dumpsters – as they return to a conventional model. This cycle continues, with another school opening elsewhere with the same hopes and promises as the one closed just before it. The pages ahead are less about exploring the underlying causes and more focused on offering an approach that will create healthy environments for all Montessori schools that allow them to thrive.

A school district is a biome, and often Montessori programs are formed within them without considering the distinctive conditions necessary to keep them alive. Districts invest an enormous sum in Montessori teacher education, child-sized furniture, Montessori materials, and the resources to launch a unique program of hands-on learning. They do this all without altering the systems and structures the school is expected to function within, forcing a model that is at its core about society by cohesion and personalization of work

in a system designed for competition and conformity. These district structures can range from the use of letter-grade report cards to required learning blocks of time each day to the purchase and distribution of workbooks across grade levels to prescribed time designated for “test prep.” Each small element must be negotiated to preserve the health of the program, and much time and energy is spent in translation.

Many schools open with a solid vision and have early success cultivating a strong teaching community, bringing families together, reaching children, and serving their unique needs. These early days are full of energy, and often these schools generate waiting lists. However, what happens next is often the result of something there all along that has taken time to come to light: the unique ecosystem of the Montessori school is not being served within the biome of the larger school district. Thus, it begins to slowly decline in ways such as losing the three-year cycle that is a hallmark of this multiyear pedagogy of patience.

This deterioration is often due to the pressures from annual assessment expectations that public schools are held to. Gains in Montessori elementary classrooms are noted at the end of a three-year cycle as children complete a sequence of lessons, become conversant with assessment terminology, and bring a greater application of abstract skills rather than at preset age requirements. This grace allows learners to build confidence as they move toward mastery rather than experiencing a rush to catch up or pressure to get answers correct regardless of whether they have ownership over the concepts. Rather than temporary recall resulting from preparing for a test, the goal in a Montessori program is a love of learning that results in permanent understanding and skill mastery.

At first, this decline is invisible. Then, when vital people at the school, who have been managing the dissonance, begin to leave, the deterioration becomes more rapid. Sometimes these schools keep their Montessori name but become traditionalized over time as teachers are hired without Montessori training and, lacking the knowledge of how to use them, Montessori materials begin to leave the classroom. Now the school is still considered a public Montessori school, yet it is not fully implementing the method. When the outcome begin to decline, then, it appears to be the result of the method rather than the hybrid approach to educating children.

This book is about how to support Montessori schools in becoming resilient - withstanding or recovering from difficult circumstances - which means acknowledging that choosing to be a part of a public Montessori school means accepting challenging conditions. Resilient Montessori schools are prepared to respond to the difficult conditions that surround public education in this country and stand solidly for what is best for children. Resilient Montessori schools pull together as a community to openly acknowledge the unique needs of the program and then advocate for them to be met within the larger landscape. Resilient Montessori schools hold clear their designer's original vision and are unwavering in the commitment to implement it fully while knowing that a large amount of creativity and innovation will be needed every day to fulfill this.

Like the method itself, we begin the learning process with a *direct aim* that gives us a sense of what we will know and be able to do once we are done.

Direct Aim:

Know

that the whole-school Montessori method (One School, Honest Talk, and Strong Systems) will increase access to Montessori for every person in your community

that the core elements within the method are essential for implementation

Do

+ unification moves that matter

+ honest conversations that lean into what is uncomfortable rather than avoid it

+ strong systems to support resilience, equity, and full Montessori implementation

In 1917, Dr. Montessori said in a lecture in Amsterdam, “We are the sowers – our children are those who reap. To labour that future generations may be better and nobler than we are – that is the task without egotism and without pride. Let us unite in this work then.”¹ Here is a call for us to unite in this work and build equitable, resilient schools together through the vision of the whole school as a Montessori prepared environment, the shared value of honest conversations, and consistent use of coherent systems and structures.

In the past decade, I've had the opportunity to work in Montessori schools across the country and have met and collaborated with many talented school practitioners along the way. Many have implemented parts of the whole school Montessori method shared here, which has evolved and

refined the ideas. In doing so, they have contributed to this book through their insight and knowledge of what is needed to truly serve each child while holding the larger framework of education in today's world. It is with great gratitude to all those who have contributed to a deeper understanding of how to implement the approach that I offer this work forward to you now.

Note about terms:

There is a wide variety of language used in Montessori schools. Here is a list of terms used in this book with guidance to ensure all readers are clear.

- **Primary:** Classrooms for children ages 3–6 years. Synonyms: early childhood, children's house
- **Lower elementary:** Classrooms for children ages 6–9 years. Synonyms: EI
- **Upper elementary:** Classrooms for children ages 9–12 years. Synonyms: EII
- **Adolescents:** Classrooms for students ages 12–18 years. Synonyms: middle school, high school, secondary
- **Key children:** Children who present atypically in the classroom and may need extra support or alterations in the learning environment. By their very nature they provide keys for our own personal transformation. Synonyms: behavior problems, high flyers, sped kids
- **Teacher, guide:** Used interchangeably throughout the book to mean the classroom adult who is trained in Montessori and leading the class
- **Assistants:** The other adult in the classroom working in support of the guide. Synonyms: paraprofessional, teaching assistant (TA)
- **Children, learners, students:** Used interchangeably throughout the book