



Mortarboard Review: Montessori-Related Dissertations 2021–2022

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Abstract: This article is the first in a series of planned reviews to be published annually that highlight a selection of dissertations. Some aspects of the selection and review methodology may be adjusted in coming issues as the process is refined to maximize the value to the field. Twenty-three Montessori-related dissertations completed during 2021 and 2022 were identified that represented five broad categories based on topic or subject matter. Two dissertations were selected for inclusion in this review because they represent high-quality research in areas that are of particular relevance and value to the field at this time: (a) public Montessori education and issues of equity and intercultural competence and (b) teacher perspectives and technology.

Each year, doctoral students around the world complete their programs in higher education by writing and defending their dissertations. These students have completed a significant project that results in a thoroughly researched manuscript. Unfortunately, these papers are not widely indexed and may be stored only within an institutional repository or a database devoted solely to dissertations and theses. This process limits exposure to other scholars, yet many of these works make valuable contributions to the field. We are currently in the middle of spring in a new calendar year, so it seems appropriate to highlight some notable dissertations from the past

two years that focus on elements related to Montessori education.¹

We began the selection process by searching a number of databases and repositories with international coverage, including EBSCO Open Dissertations (<https://biblioboard.com/opendissertations>), Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (<http://search.ndltd.org>), Open Access Theses and Dissertations (<https://oatd.org>), and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (<https://www.proquest.com>).

1. This article is the first in this series, so we have selected from two calendar years. In the future, we will draw on only one calendar year.

We independently searched for relevant dissertations to consider and then combined our lists, which yielded 23 unique dissertations in English from 2021 and 2022. The dissertations were then categorized by topic or subject matter. From this exercise, four categories were identified, and dissertations from these categories were considered for review. Categories included technology and teacher perspectives, public Montessori education and equity and intercultural competence, psychology and human development, and history and educational contexts. Further evaluation included an exclusion of any dissertations that had previously been published (e.g., article, book) and a consideration of the status of the universities represented (e.g., not for profit/for profit, public/private, religious/secular). Any dissertation that was published elsewhere was not considered, and we determined that all dissertations would be evaluated on their own merit regardless of the university's status. Two of the 23 dissertations were selected for inclusion in this review because they represent high-quality research in areas that are of particular relevance and value to the field at this time: (a) public Montessori education and issues of equity and intercultural competence and (b) teacher perspectives and technology.

Public Montessori Education and Issues of Equity and Intercultural Competence

In the United States, the history of educational opportunities for children of color and low socioeconomic status (SES) has a complicated past (Crutchfield et al., 2020). These factors have a compounding effect that lasts a lifetime and often across generations (O'Brien et al., 2020). Within the past century, social and legislative actions have addressed this reality and provided children with quality educational opportunities, regardless of SES and race/ethnicity (Bilingual Education Act, 1967; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965; Equal Educational Opportunities Act, 1974; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Improving America's Schools Act, 1994; No Child Left Behind, 2002). One proven method has been the introduction of public Montessori schools. These schools have been shown to provide supportive and effective learning environments for children of color and low SES, and the following dissertation is a case study of one such school (Debs & Brown, 2017).

Summers, H. E. (2022) *Hybrid Montessori education: Teacher reflections on the care and education of underserved Black children* [Doctoral dissertation, DePaul University].

https://via.library.depaul.edu/soe_etd/228

In a dissertation from 2022, Heather E. Summers explored “how Montessori education today functions outside of highly resourced, private school environments that educate mostly white children” through a case study of one public Montessori school in the midwestern United States (p. 75). This school “addresses the educational, social, and emotional needs of Black children” (p. 75) through a hybrid approach that embraces principles of Montessori education, “tenets of culturally responsive teaching, and elements of an education for social justice” (p. 130–131). Summers ultimately asserted—and demonstrated through the data collected—that this school is an example of how this hybrid model is working for this community and may be a model for other similar communities. In this context, somewhat confusingly, Summers used the term *hybrid* to describe the combined use of practices, principles, and goals, as opposed to the more commonly used reference to the use of technology within educational practices.

Through an extensive literature review, Summers described in clear language the principles and philosophy of Montessori education while also providing a historical account of Montessori education within the United States. Approaching her study from a social justice perspective, Summers asserted that the Montessori Method “was and is intended to reverse oppressive constructs often found in traditional education” (p. 3). Summers's historical account documented the evolution of Montessori education within the United States, culminating with the present-day public Montessori movement.

Defining the problem her study addresses, Summers explained that public Montessori schools (including magnet and charter schools) must navigate the friction between an education model that embraces liberty and social justice (Montessori education), while being constrained by a public education system that reinforces an inequitable social structure. Summers acknowledged that public Montessori programs face challenges when maintaining the fidelity of the Method while being situated or entangled within the confines of district and state standards.

Through a qualitative case study, relying on semistructured interviews with teachers and administrators (collectively identified as educators), Summers examines three key questions: (a) What conditions have shaped the culture of the school? (b) How are this school's educators responding to the impacts imposed by those conditions? and (c) How does the school characterize and operationalize education for social justice in its educators' daily practice and overall school culture (p. 10). In her results, Summers identified three themes: trauma, inequality, and racism.

Summers found that educators in this school must modify their practices in a way that acknowledges the school having what the interviewees described as a "culture of trauma" (p. 78) resulting from violence and poverty in the community. Summers examined how inequity and inequality manifest, along with their consequences. One example she identified is standardized testing and its direct existential and financial consequences to the school because children are expected to perform at the same level and pace according to their age rather than their developmental stage. Finally, Summers's data revealed the effect of racism on the educators and students even though she "did not directly pose any questions to the participants regarding race" (p. 92). For example, Summers aptly referred to the "racialized conditions" (p. 92) described by participants in areas, such as the neglect of the school's physical conditions.

A theme that transverses Summers's work is that implementing the Montessori Method in a public school that educates predominantly low-income Black children is not enough to combat the systemic barriers (i.e., trauma, inequity, racism) that these children and their families experience. Montessori education can be practiced in a way that is culturally sensitive and responsive; however, this is not the default. Summers's case study documented how the Montessori Method of education is being implemented as a culturally sensitive and culturally responsive tool that allows educators to assist each child to develop and achieve their potential, regardless of their SES. Summers's research revealed that educators are using Montessori principles to face the challenge of "changing the damaging narrative that structural racism has embedded in public education" (p. 130). The educators are aware of the lived experiences of their students and seek to create a school environment that is culturally responsive and conducive to learning. By emotionally and developmentally meeting the children where they are, these educators have been able to help

these children grow and learn in ways that will hopefully lay the groundwork for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

Summers's research revealed that—through collectivist cultural practices (i.e., social norms, beliefs, and behaviors that prioritize the needs and goals of the group or community over the individual), professional development that empowers educators with a consistent set of tools and a grounding in Montessori practices—the children and educators at this school have been able to overcome the adverse sociocultural conditions they were given. This may be a model for other similar environments and other public Montessori programs. To this end, Summers included a section with recommendations for "those who work in public Montessori schools as well as those who advocate for Montessori in the public sector" (p. 155). These recommendations (pp. 155–160) provide evidence-based information about what has worked in this community that may be effective in other contexts. Through the evidence gleaned by these qualitative interviews and the evidence-based recommendations, Summers has made a valuable contribution to the field.

Technology and Teacher Perspectives

Although digital technology pervades today's society, its use in Montessori classrooms varies widely. Digital tools that are available in most people's pockets could not have been anticipated by Maria Montessori and her contemporaries, but it has been argued that she embraced the technology of her day and may have seen the potential of today's devices (Park & Murray, 2023). Others are concerned about the degree of abstraction necessary to leverage such tools, so modern Montessori educators grapple with the appropriate role of technology in the Montessori approach across stages of development. Support for introducing technological tools in the youngest Montessori classrooms is inconsistent, but more agreement is evident in the need for technology as children get older. As the technology debate grows in the field of Montessori education, the topic is surfacing as an interesting focus for doctoral dissertations.

Williams, A. M. (2021) *Technology in the Montessori adolescent environment* [Doctoral dissertation, Grand Canyon University].

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2599175728>

Montessori recommended that students who are in the third plane of development, ranging in age

from 12–15 and 15–18, be educated in a way that recognizes them as *Erdkinder*, or children of the earth, whom she envisioned being best educated in a farm-school setting. Programs at today's Montessori middle and high schools work to honor Montessori's original ideas; however, as Alicia Marie Williams noted in her 2021 dissertation, the number of people living in rural environments has decreased in the United States, and adolescent Montessori programs now strive to transition students into a world where technology holds a large role. Williams's project describes how adolescent programs address technology in the classroom.

Williams focused her research on Montessori adolescent teachers and addressed a gap in the literature about the Montessori adolescent environment regarding the use of technology. In her paper, she operationally defined technology as "static or mobile equipment which connects to the internet and/or global positioning systems" (p. 20), including examples such as computers, phones, or classroom smartboards. The dissertation explores how Montessori adolescent teachers describe using technology; how they describe using technology in thematic, or interdisciplinary, learning; and how Montessori adolescent teachers view the use of technology to inspire citizenship and the work of the head, hands, and heart.

Williams included interview and focus group data, along with a screening questionnaire and digital artifacts, to demonstrate how Montessori adolescent teachers are using technology in their classrooms. In her analyses, Williams discovered eight deductive themes. In considering how Montessori adolescent teachers describe using technology (research question [RQ] 1), the themes that arose were balancing technology and Montessori education, which included teaching students online safety and digital citizenship. Three themes arose from RQ2, which explored how Montessori adolescent teachers describe using technology in thematic learning: technology with individual students, technology with groups of students, and how technology changes teaching. In RQ3, which addressed the use of technology to inspire citizenship, three themes arose: technology for life lessons, technology in microeconomics, and technology in service learning. The inductive themes emerged, then the ways in which COVID changed school life, and, finally, ways that technology melded with Montessori education.

Williams provided a list for teachers of ways that they might consider including technology in their environments. She closed by suggesting that Montessori

organizations could do more to provide guidelines regarding technology and that Montessori training centers should consider addressing how to use technology in the classroom.

Williams's study began to answer essential questions about technology and the Montessori adolescent environment. Her interviews and focus groups provided rich data about what current practices are, and, through the voices of the teachers, Williams shared concerns. When a study is the first to examine a phenomenon, it can be difficult to know what questions to ask and what type of data to collect. This qualitative descriptive dissertation allowed participants to guide the process, providing a ground-up view of technology in the adolescent classroom. Including the perspective of students in the teachers' classrooms would have been enlightening. Further exploration could include a couple of questions: Do the students feel comfortable with technology? Do they believe that their teachers use it too much or not enough? Addressing these questions and other related queries would be a logical next step for future research into the use of the modern tools of technology in the Montessori adolescent classroom.

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Appendix: List of 2021–2022 Dissertations Considered

Psychology and Human Development

Mamani, P. L. L. (2022). *Links between screen time, Montessori preschool exposure, and working memory* [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2747902366>

Nguyen, L. (2022). *SSIS SEL as a determinant of Montessori education's impact on SEL outcomes* [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2622942402>

Technology and Teacher Perspectives

Andell, S. (2022). *Outside the prepared environment: How Montessori teacher training influences practitioner attitudes to technology* [Doctoral dissertation, William Howard Taft University]. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED618535.pdf>

Benson, J. R. (2022). *Assessing relationships among autonomy, supportive leadership, and burnout in public elementary teachers* [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2652185676>

Borgman, C. (2021). *Enacting accountability in innovative schools: The sensemaking strategies of public Montessori principals* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia, 2021]. <https://doi.org/10.18130/v3-v7x1-a966>

Ghandour, Y. (2022). *Teacher and director beliefs about their simultaneous implementation of the Montessori Method and Quebec's educational programme* [Doctoral dissertation, Concordia University]. <https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/990328/>

Goss, A. M. (2022). *Young children's mathematical spatial reasoning in a Montessori classroom* [Doctoral dissertation, Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa]. <https://doi.org/10.20381/ruor-27979>

Madrigal, M. V. (2022). *The effects of a preschool program on kindergarten achievements* [Doctoral dissertation, Saint Peter's University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2720980099>

Mann-Bailey, M. P. (2021). *Project-based and student-centered learning in teaching the Montessori social development curriculum* [Doctoral dissertation, Grand Canyon University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2584058648/abstract/8007C961141442F3PQ/1>

Williams, A. M. (2021). *Technology in the Montessori adolescent environment* [Doctoral dissertation, Grand Canyon University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2599175728>

Public Montessori, Equity and Cultural Competence

Elsherbeen, H. (2022). *Examining elementary students' development of intercultural competence through self-regulatory prompts* [Doctoral dissertation, George Mason University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2712765555>

Jackson, J. R. (2022). *Maintaining the Montessori Method in Louisiana public schools: A qualitative descriptive study* [Doctoral dissertation, Grand Canyon University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2686240438>

Lovett-Cunningham, L. K. (2022). *Head Start teachers' descriptions of inclusion* [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2642344173>

Moses, C. A. (2022). *Journaling for equity: A self-reflective process of discovery for middle school teachers in public charter Montessori schools* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2715395856>

Summers, H. (2022). *Hybrid Montessori education: Teacher reflections on the care and education of under-served Black children* [Doctoral dissertation, DePaul University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2671606105>

Teems, H. (2021). *The benefits and barriers to arts integration: Arts accessibility in public Montessori* [Doctoral dissertation, University of New England]. <https://dune.une.edu/theses/363>

History and Education Contexts

Campanelli, C. (2021). *Birth to three language acquisition: Influences of ambient language in the Montessori setting* [Doctoral dissertation, Long Island University]. https://digitalcommons.liu.edu/post_fultext_dis/29

Green, R. E. (2022). *Examining adolescent voices in urban Montessorianism within the third plane of development* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville]. <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/3802>

Carreras, M. V. (2022). *A local affair: Barcelona's municipal schools and recreational activities in late Francoist Spain, 1950–1975* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego]. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4km703xh>

Johnson, V. J. (2022). *Education anywhere? A constructivist grounded theory study of Montessori around the world* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Nebraska—Lincoln]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2708187605>

Horan, Sister G. M. (2022). *Incorporating Dr. Montessori's Catholic vision within a religiously diverse Catholic school* [Doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2679732853>

Tindall, R. (2022). *Architecture and students' physical activity in learning environments* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Notre Dame Australia]. <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/343>