



Rediscovering the Child: Review of Montessori Action Research Studies 2022–2023

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Abstract: Action research is the term used for investigations done in the field, often by practitioners, and typically with a pragmatic rather than theoretical purpose (Willis & Edwards, 2014). This type of research is a key part of many Montessori teacher education programs, but the value of this important work is often lost to the field because the papers reside in separate institutional repositories with limited indexing. The *Journal of Montessori Research* is introducing a new annual review article series which features selected graduate student action research studies. The authors of this recurring series of articles represent Montessori teacher preparation programs and other university-based research roles. They will select studies that they believe are particularly high quality and relevant to the journal's readers. We are calling this series of articles "Rediscovering the Child" to honor Maria Montessori's seminal work and to acknowledge that all Montessori teachers engage in an ongoing process of rediscovering the children in their classrooms. When this process is formalized, action research is the result. This article is the first in the series and highlights six studies from University of Wisconsin-River Falls and St. Catherine University. In the coming issues, we will likely refine some aspects of our selection and review processes and expand the programs represented.

In the first chapters of *Discovery of the Child*, Montessori (1967) recounts the experiences leading up to her most noteworthy work in the first Casa dei Bambini. After explaining that she was a student of philosophy and took courses in experimental psychology, she stated,

I wanted to experiment with the various methods used successfully by Seguin with children when they first came to school at the age of six untrained and

unlearned. But since we are constantly hampered by our habits and prejudices, I never thought of applying these same methods on preschool children. The opportunity of doing so came to me by pure chance. (p. 33)

Reading like a personal journal, she described the ideal opportunity that the San Lorenzo housing project presented to develop a scientific method for discovering the child. She continued,

This ambitious idea of being able to help in man's development through scientific methods of education during that period of life in which his intelligence and character are being molded had not struck me despite my keen interest in this question... [but] chance played its part. As a matter of fact, chance, that is, a peculiar set of circumstances, must almost always provide the spark to an intuition. (p. 34)

Thus, long before the term *action research* was introduced, Montessori was engaged in systematic efforts of experimentation and observation to support children's learning.

Today, Mertler (2020) describes action research as "grassroots efforts to find answers to important questions and to foster change" (p. 11). In educational research, action research is particularly valuable since it offers teachers an opportunity to reflect on and improve their practice. Action research is typically characterized by a few key features (Mertler, 2020). First, it most often employs qualitative research methods, which emphasize the unique context and circumstances under study rather than generalizability to a larger population. The practitioner-researcher employing action research methods also deeply considers their own participation in the classroom dynamic because they are both a practitioner and a participant. Finally, action research necessarily includes reflection so that educators "critically think about their actions and interactions, confirm or challenge ideas, and take risks" (Miller, 2011, as cited in Mertler, 2020, p. 16). In Montessori teacher preparation programs, formal action research serves two main purposes: a) to inform the practitioner of the research question under consideration and b) to inform *other* practitioners who may have similar circumstances and contexts.

The authors of this article represent two university-based Montessori teacher preparation programs in the United States, and we are pleased to feature a small number of the excellent studies completed by students in our programs over the past two academic years that we believe will be of particular interest to the readers of this publication. Each of the sections below provides overviews of the purpose and role of action research in the respective graduate program and of the design and results from three individual studies performed by students.

University of Wisconsin-River Falls

In 2012, Gay Ward, professor of children's literature, chose to integrate the action research methodology into

the new Montessori Teacher Education Program that she founded at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls (UWRF; Ward & Miller, 2019). Today, Ward, who is also the recipient of the American Montessori Society (AMS) 2024 Living Legacy Award, continues to support UWRF students with their action research projects. These projects represent the culmination of the Master of Science in Education (MSE) program that includes coursework to earn AMS Montessori credentials for ages 3–6, 6–9, and 6–12.

UWRF explains the relationship between its focus on current research and Montessori coursework in the MSE program by using the analogy of building the Pink Tower. Starting with the largest cube, the foundational coursework commences with Montessori Philosophy and Pedagogy but then, immediately, the next "cube" of coursework integrates a research perspective and practicing research skills. In other words, all throughout the UWRF MSE Montessori program, students are constructing their own towers including both research and credentialing content. The entire master's program builds and develops the action research skills needed for the final paper which more than meets AMS's yearlong teaching practicum project requirement for the credential. For example, in their first course, UWRF graduate students gain familiarity and fluency with American Psychological Association standards for scholarly writing, Montessori philosophy and pedagogy, and read contemporary neuroscience research. In the second semester, the observation course addresses the role of self-reflection as it pertains to both action research methodology and the Montessori Method. In this same course, graduate students design a qualitative or quantitative instrument to measure an identified need in their classrooms. Then, they use the instrument, code the data, and confront the decisions of how to best represent this data. Through specifically designed and carefully sequenced assignments like these, the UWRF MSE Montessori program intersperses research skills, critical inquiry, and current literature throughout the Montessori credential graduate school experience. During the 2020 revision of the UWRF MSE Montessori program's mission, vision, and values, the tagline *the intersection of authentic Montessori and research* emerged and will be used in informational materials in the future.

The three papers featured here represent well-designed and executed action research projects done at three different levels: 3–6, 6–9 and 9–12.

Moats, E. (2023). *Together in one spirit: The effects of a Montessori classroom team's spiritual preparation on classroom harmony* [Master's paper, University of Wisconsin-River Falls].

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/84590>

Moats, an Early Childhood teacher, and her team came to powerful conclusions about their teaching practice through an action research project. Moats, who set out to study the spiritual development and its impact on the learning environment, aimed to identify traits and behaviors of leaders and colleagues that support the healthy spirituality necessary for a harmonious classroom. Through an innovative collection of instruments such as pre/post surveys, an interactive video journal application called Marco Polo, classroom observations, and a photo journal, she concluded that her connection to colleagues, children, and families increased through intentional communication, both in times of ease and flow as well as in times of challenge. Acceptance of cycles of joyful and difficult times also contributed to the development of the team's shared spirituality.

Bladow, J. L. (2022). *Supporting evidence-based writing in the Upper Elementary Montessori classroom: The interplay of the dynamic guide and original materials* [Master's paper, University of Wisconsin-River Falls].

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/83423>

Bladow, an Upper Elementary Montessori teacher in a public Montessori setting, witnessed her students struggle with both the Wisconsin Fast Forward exam and state standard of evidence-based writing. This participant-researcher designed an extensive series of Montessori materials with color coding, modeling, and self-correcting/self-monitoring components that were used as tools in the 12-week action research study. While the research was highly formative to this Montessori teacher who was not new to teaching but rather new to Montessori, one of the greatest and unexpected take-aways of the action research was that her students' self-perceptions as a "writer" or "not a writer" tangibly influenced mastery of the steps needed for successful evidence-based writing on a standardized test. After completing this paper, Bladow continued the iterative process of action research in her classroom the subsequent year and saw evidence of positive results on standardized tests for this writing skill.

Kruchten, M. (2023). *Student experiences during unstructured play periods* [Master's paper, University of Wisconsin-River Falls].

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/84609>

In an urban charter school with a significant population of children with special needs, Kruchten examined the implementation of "choice play time" at the end of the day in her Lower Elementary classroom. Her study challenged existing beliefs about allowing figurines from home and play items such as sunglasses and play phones in a Montessori classroom. Kruchten made some surprising and important conclusions about items brought from home: they were clear supports for self-regulation, community building, and meeting the needs of individuals. This action research project concluded that in this teacher-researcher's population, a play period with tangible objects aided social emotional skill development, was therapeutic, and promoted self-regulation skills.

St. Catherine University

The Montessori Education and Leadership program (formally, AM2) at St. Catherine University was created to support teachers earning a Montessori credential by awarding university credits for Montessori coursework, which could then be applied to a Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) degree. The program leverages the deep learning and comprehensive nature of teacher education programs accredited through Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE). Graduate students complete their degrees with 16 additional credits built on the tenets of the Montessori Method as they pursue what Montessori educators call preparation of the adult (Jendza, 2023), which includes courses on holistic practices, critical analysis of Montessori education, and educational leadership. Students complete the program with a series of action research courses.

Action research was a clear choice for the research methods requirement for the Montessori Education and Leadership program because Montessorians are trained in the art of observation. The intentionality of action research elevates observation practice for graduate students who begin by creating an intervention starting from an inquiry statement. They continue by articulating a supporting theory and conducting background research followed by implementing an intervention. The action research process occurs alongside acknowledgment of personal biases and a critical examination of current practices and systems.

Recent shifts in the action research approach at St. Catherine include moving away from a primary focus on a problem statement to a new centering on areas of inquiry. This shift allows a research process that is more open to potential areas of study that are not necessarily rooted in a negatively viewed problem. Transitioning away from a problem orientation aligns with an asset mindset in the classroom, which is rooted in the strengths of students, families, and communities. Finally, the action research process supports Montessori educators in developing their own grounding theory as education professionals. The studies highlighted here represent examples that illustrate the importance of practitioners articulating a theory that weaves throughout the research process.

Keller, K. (2023). *Breaking bread: Co-creating mindful eating practices in Lower Elementary* [Master's thesis, St. Catherine University].

<https://sophia.stkate.edu/maed/503/>

In this study, Keller began with a foundation of Social Cognitive Theory and an inquiry statement about the impact of multicultural culinary food on fear of trying new foods in a Montessori Lower Elementary classroom. The research involved food preparation and mindful eating strategies with repeated exposure. The findings indicate that student involvement in food preparation and educational activities minimized fear of trying new foods in this setting. Keller's work provides guidance in best practices to introduce new foods while connecting food to culture. However, Keller also provides clear connections to grounding all our work in the student's cultures and interests and creating an environment that values new experiences to benefit all learners.

Torres, K. (2022). *Finding roots in the Montessori social studies curriculum* [Master's thesis, St. Catherine University]. <https://sophia.stkate.edu/maed/489/>

This action research project used the culturally sustaining theory and antibias, anti-racist frameworks. The aim was to determine if the teacher-researcher learning about her own culture followed by an equity audit of a Montessori social studies curriculum impacted her feelings of self-efficacy and resilience. The intervention was conducted over the course of six weeks and included the researcher studying her own history and culture as a Puerto Rican with ties to the Taino Indigenous people and then creating culturally sustaining lessons to augment the Montessori social studies curriculum. The data collected suggested that the teacher-researcher's self-efficacy was strong throughout

the study, but resilience wavered and declined over the six-week period. Findings suggest that the effort to inform and create new lessons can increase perceived efficacy, but systems are needed to better support teachers of color in engaging in this demanding work.

Anderson, D. (2022). *The impact of discourse on math learning in Upper Elementary* [Master's thesis, St. Catherine University].

<https://sophia.stkate.edu/maed/460/>

Anderson's inquiry investigated the complexity of the Montessori mathematics curriculum in Upper Elementary through exploring the efficacy of differentiating discourse methods to support math learning through the lens of constructivism. This intervention encouraged students to apply discourse strategies and to engage in mathematical modeling. The research data measured the impact on student mindset, behavior, and participation in the subject. Findings suggested that students' engagement in discourse positively impacted their mindsets toward engaging in math. However, Anderson noted that additional research is required to quantify gains over an extended period. Anderson's research sheds light on the complexity of the content area and the need to support critical thinking. The findings from this study indicate that differentiation of discourse strategies to increase vocabulary, assist in problem-solving, and utilize visualizations or peer support to assist in the cuing process help to aid learning with concrete manipulatives in this setting.

Conclusion

While we have provided links to the studies reviewed in this article on the respective institutions' websites, the American Montessori Society also includes submitted Montessori action research projects in its online Research Library (2023). Although the library's action research content is not comprehensive, the searchable database benefits those who want to learn from existing research studies, especially their instruments, designs, conclusions, and study limitations. Finally, authors of comprehensive and well-designed action research often submit their studies for consideration for the *Journal of Montessori Research* or for poster sessions at major Montessori conferences and events. The selection process for acceptance at these venues is competitive so that only strong studies are included. Consequently, these avenues benefit both the researcher who is able to share further details about their work and for practitioners to learn

about the challenges and solutions of other educators while they network, ask clarifying questions, and meet other Montessori researchers from around the world. We encourage you to read further about the action research studies featured in this article and to explore action research available through other avenues. The next edition of *Rediscovering the Child* is planned for the fall 2024 issue of the *Journal of Montessori Research*.

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