



Rediscovering the Child: Review of Montessori Educator Research Projects 2024–2025

Angela K. Murray, University of Kansas

This article is part of the *Journal of Montessori Research*'s annual series titled "Rediscovering the Child," which is an effort to disseminate practitioner research and classroom-based action research (CBAR) that does not typically have a widely accessible forum. CBAR is powerful because it is conducted in real classrooms with real children by practitioners who wish to address their real-world problems. Several studies are highlighted each year to inspire other practitioners to formalize their classroom inquiries for sharing with the wider community. Practitioners in the field can reflect on their own practice by learning how other educators address challenges they face.

Montessori (1909/1912) believed the teacher is an integral part of the scientific process, saying, "... if we make of the teacher an observer, familiar with the experimental methods, then we must make it possible for her to observe and to experiment in the school" (p. 28). In this spirit, Montessori teacher preparation programs often include requirements for CBAR or practitioner inquiry for trainees to receive credentials. The research featured here represents work from two such Montessori teacher preparation programs: St. Catherine University in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and University of Wisconsin–

River Falls. Faculty selected from their programs six high-quality papers, which are discussed here.

Previous articles in this series included CBAR and practitioner inquiry studies, and that is also the case this year. Practitioner inquiry is similar to CBAR as both are conducted by educators investigating issues related to their personal teaching practices. The key difference is that practitioner inquiry, unlike CBAR, does not take place in the classroom (Gerker, 2024).

This review begins with studies that focus on life skills, by exploring the impact of outdoor play and engagement with nature on classroom engagement and focus. This topic is addressed separately by two different authors featured in this review: Speakmanova and Lederer. Work by Dinkler looks at the role of music in the development of prosocial behavior as a life skill. Next, papers addressing the academic subjects of reading and math are examined. The first of the academic-focused papers is by Allred and Johnson, who explore reading development for early childhood students who did not have 3-year-old Montessori experiences. In the second, Thompson investigates use of goal-setting strategies on math fluency for elementary students. This year's review concludes with a practitioner inquiry paper by Sadrnafisi,

who develops a supportive teacher community to address the causes of teacher turnover.

Life Skills

Three of the reviewed CBAR studies examined interventions in classrooms designed to enhance children's life skills through increased engagement, focus, or prosocial behaviors.

Speakmanova, H. (2024). *Outdoor play and classroom engagement* [Master's thesis, St. Catherine University]. <https://cdm17519.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/maed/id/609/rec/1>

Speakmanova investigated the impact of outdoor free play on classroom engagement within the 3- to 6-year-old classroom. The intervention allowed children to play for about 30 minutes, two mornings each week, at a creek trail and small beach near the school. Classroom engagement was defined as interacting with peers, teachers, or objects in a developmentally appropriate manner; disruptive or destructive behaviors in the classroom were marked as unengaged. Over the course of six weeks, a slight increase in engagement was measured through classroom observation, tally sheets, and surveys. Additional findings from this CBAR study highlight the importance of movement, a balanced sensory input, and the role of the adult in early childhood development. In particular, interesting findings are related to the negative impact of overt adult direction and guidance.

Lederer, M. (2025). *Time in nature and its impact on classroom focus* [Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin–River Falls]. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/95657>

Similar to Speakmanova in her CBAR study, Lederer examined the effects of spending time outdoors but with Upper Elementary students. This practitioner's public Montessori charter school is located next to a large county park and woods, which provides a convenient and meaningful means to examine impact of outdoor time for 9- to 12-year-olds. The study included six weeks of nature outings on Fridays, and the author collected data on productivity throughout those weeks. Data was also gathered about nature exposure at home. For measuring focus, the author used an instrument of the *Montessori Assessment Playbook* from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (2019): "Observing Work Engagement–Elementary." Results demonstrated students staying focused for longer periods of time on

nature outing days and seemingly less drastic productivity slumps usually seen on the last day of the school week. The practitioner-researcher deemed the most interesting findings were the unanticipated effects beyond the impact on student focus. The surveys showed strong support for spending school time in nature, with parents and students both feeling children are happier, more focused, calmer, and healthier after spending time in nature.

Dinkler, C. (2024). *Joint music making in a Montessori classroom: Is there a correlation between joint music making and prosocial experiences?* [Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin–River Falls]. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/85537>

Rather than outdoor play, Dinkler explored the potential of music-making to enhance life skills by fostering prosocial experiences. The author used a single student CBAR case study design in a Montessori family home care facility. Specifically, the intervention integrated joint music-making experiences into the morning work time in a small, private 3- to 6-year old classroom. The intervention added 15 to 20 minutes of joint music-making sessions each morning for two weeks, followed by one week without the intervention, alternating for three cycles over the course of more than nine weeks of the study. This single case study focused on the impact of the intervention on the prosocial behaviors of a 4-year-old who had challenges in this area. Data was collected through observations from the teacher, as well as from parents immediately after picking up the child from school. Results found an increase in positive social and emotional behaviors throughout the nine-week study period. This study further highlights the Montessori guide's ability to be flexible in following the child to adapt the classroom to meet their individual needs.

Academics

Two CBAR studies reviewed in this article focus specifically on enhancing academic skills, including reading and math skills.

Thompson, S. (2024). *Reading development in a Montessori pre-K and kindergarten classroom* [Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin–River Falls]. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/85540>

Thompson's CBAR study was conducted in a public Montessori charter classroom with 4-year-olds and kindergarteners. Thompson developed a structured literacy program using (1) the Montessori Method's

Movable Alphabet with the Waseca Reading Program towers (Waseca Biomes, 2021); (2) words, phrases, and sentences from *Primary Phonics* books (Makar, 2008); and (3) specific literary sequences embedded in the *Primary Phonics* series. The teacher-researcher found that ongoing literacy games and culture in her classroom contributed to students' overall growth and development. Other data, including parent surveys, indicate a structured approach to literacy is crucial. In particular, using the Movable Alphabet with image cards for spelling variations (encoding) prior to decoding from a book proved to be extremely effective. This study highlights some needs of a Montessori public setting where students who enter have missed the 3-year-old year of Children's House, which lays the foundation for literacy.

Allred, K. & Johnson, K. (2025). *The impact of Montessori strategies and goal setting on math fact fluency with elementary students* [Master's thesis, St. Catherine University]. <https://cdm17519.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/maed/id/612/rec/2>

Over the course of six weeks, Allred and Johnson's CBAR study investigated the impact of an intervention incorporating Montessori lessons and goal-setting strategies on math fact fluency for 74 students in first through sixth grades. Students attended Montessori schools: a private school in Ohio and a public school in Georgia. Montessori lessons with didactic materials, along with goal setting, self-graphing of results, and student journals, resulted in increased positive feelings and dispositions, including motivation and confidence, toward math fact fluency. In addition, data from pre- and post-assessments of students' recall of math facts and computation showed improved accuracy and speed.

Practitioner Inquiry

The final graduate paper reviewed in this article is an example of practitioner inquiry because, although it was by a practitioner addressing challenges in her own setting, it was not conducted in her classroom.

Sadrnafisi, M. (2024). *Investigating the causes of teacher turnover and cultivating a supportive teacher community to address the issue* [Master's thesis, St. Catherine University]. <https://cdm17519.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/maed/id/603/rec/1>

Sadrnafisi sought to improve teacher retention by building a community of trust, communication, and

collaboration in a practitioner inquiry study. Over the course of eight weeks, five teachers who worked with ages 3 to 6 in a private Montessori school in Georgia engaged in one-on-one meetings every other week to connect with school leadership. This study also explored issues that initially motivated teachers to participate in the project, which brought to light teachers' daily challenges, such as issues with communication among colleagues and difficulties in managing student behaviors. Results highlight that improving communication between teachers and leadership enhances teacher satisfaction and feelings of being valued and heard through a process of resolving conflicts with colleagues or receiving essential support for challenges in the classroom.

Conclusion

The next installment in this "Rediscovering the Child" series is scheduled for fall 2026. For those who wish to explore other CBAR and practitioner inquiry papers, the American Montessori Society (AMS) Research Library (<https://amshq.org/research-library/>) has a repository available. AMS reports that Research Library updates are currently underway and commits to expanding the library. The organization also plans to establish in the future a new process for practitioners to submit practitioner inquiry and CBAR papers for consideration. The *Journal of Montessori Research* welcomes submissions of well-designed and thoroughly documented CBAR and practitioner inquiry studies to be considered for publication as individual articles (<https://journals.ku.edu/jmr/about/submissions>).

References

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