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Landmark Study of Montessori Education to be Released this Fall

JULY 7, 2016 BY [DAVID AYER](#) — [3 COMMENTS](#)

The [Riley Institute](#) at [Furman University](#) in South Carolina is getting ready to release the full results of the [largest, most comprehensive study of Montessori education ever undertaken](#) — a five year, \$370,00 study of 45 public Montessori programs by a prestigious educational research institution.



Montessori, as regular readers of this site will know*, is a small but growing area of educational research. Publications such as Angeline Lillard's [Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius](#) and the newly launched [Journal of Montessori Research](#) (profiled [here](#) on MP) have raised the standard and profile of work in this area, but studies have typically been small in scope as well as few and far between.

Objective scientific study has also been hampered by definitional issues and selection bias. With the term 'Montessori' in the public domain, it has been hard to pin down exactly what

practices are being studied. And with Montessori most often found in schools of choice, as private, magnet, charter, or even 'ordinary' district programs, it has been difficult to filter out socio-economic and parental involvement factors.

Not any more. With this multi-year study, covering dozens of programs, many of them Title I neighborhood schools with no selection effect, featuring a strong Montessori fidelity component, and carried out by independent researchers, we have a solid, foundational evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of Montessori education across a wide range of domains and demographics.



Data collection for the study is nearly done, but final, fully vetted **results** won't be available until later this year, when analysis is complete. Still, principal investigator Brooke Culclasure was able to share some information with me and at a presentation at the AMS Annual Conference in March.

QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The study asked five basic questions:

Fidelity: What's the fidelity of Montessori implementation in South Carolina public schools?

This is crucial, because high-fidelity Montessori has been shown by Dr. Angeline Lillard ([here](#) and [here](#)) to be associated with better outcomes. Fidelity will be measured with reference to the Montessori Public Policy Initiative's **Montessori Essentials** (a joint AMI-AMS project), which cites elements such as a three-hour work period, a prepared environment, and a trained teacher.

Demographics: How do Montessori and non-Montessori public school students compare by race, income, background, etc.? This is essential to controlling for differences in populations.

Outcomes: How do the Montessori students compare on academic outcomes? Naturally, this is what policy makers tend to focus on.

"Affective Domain" Measures: How do the students compare on measures of work habits, social skills, and executive function? These measures are increasingly seen as important for

whole child development, as well as for supporting academic success.

Teachers: What are the demographics and perspectives of public Montessori teachers? How do they feel about their work and their impact on students?

Answers to these questions have been gathered via surveys to administrators, teachers, and families, from school attendance and discipline records, with standardized tests and “soft skills” assessments, and through direct observation. This last may be the most remarkable element of the study. Trained observers (Montessori guides at the level they observed) made more than 80 randomly assigned, unannounced visits over three years, evaluating classroom climate, prepared environments, presentations, lesson planning, record keeping, and more.

Another important aspect of the work is the independence and validity built into the study. Culclasure and her team are not Montessorians themselves, so the study can't be disqualified as Montessori investigating itself. At the same time, the research goals and design were informed by experienced Montessori advisers.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Why is this happening in South Carolina? The short answer is, that's where the **public Montessori** is.

South Carolina has had public Montessori going back to 1995, in **Laurens County District 55**, and the NCMPS **public Montessori census** shows 51 schools serving more than 7,000 students in nearly 300 classrooms — more than any other state by far. Montessori education is integrated into the **state Department of Education**.



The South Carolina based **Self Family Foundation** has been an early and consistent supporter of public Montessori in the state, helping (among many other contributions) to found the **teacher**

training program at **Lander University** in Greenwood. Five years ago, observing the popularity and success of Montessori in South Carolina, especially in high poverty and rural areas of the state, Self decided to launch a comprehensive study of its effectiveness. The foundation, along with **South Carolina Education Oversight Committee**, partnered with the **Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership at Furman University**, named for Institute Board Chair and former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley and a nationally

recognized leader in education and public policy research, and the present study is the result of that initiative.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Fully analyzed results will be published later this year, but researchers shared some preliminary findings at the AMS Annual Conference in Chicago in March.

Fidelity: An implementation survey was completed by school principals, with an excellent response rate. Fidelity was assessed according to a number of measures, including age groupings, the presence of Montessori materials, the length of work periods, and Montessori teacher certification . Further analysis will incorporate classroom observations, but the initial results gave 27 of the 42 programs a “high” fidelity score, seven a “mid’ score, and zero with a low score. (Eight programs had missing or incomplete responses.)

Classroom Observations: Classrooms were assessed on their prepared environments, general classroom climate, student learning, instruction, lesson planning, record keeping and student assessment . Primary and lower elementary classrooms scored at 83-84% on average, while upper elementary classrooms averaged 77%. The highest scores were in classroom climate and student assessment/lesson planning, while the lowest came in the prepared environments and in record keeping. The presence of a full set of Montessori materials was identified as a weakness across programs. Again, more detailed results are still to come.

Demographics: The study showed the strongest enrollment at the pre-K level, with good participation through second grade and a steady drop-off through middle school. Public Montessori schools populations proved to be a bit whiter and richer than non-Montessori programs, although not by much.

Outcomes: Very broadly, the Montessori students performed better than state averages in writing and English Language Arts (ELA), while scoring a bit below in math. The Montessori students had better attendance and fewer discipline incidents, and slightly more out-of-school suspensions. On the affective domain, Montessori students showed generally higher executive function.

Teachers: Montessori teachers generally loved their jobs and would like to stay in them (rather than moving to administration). More than half (58%) expressed some concern about their school’s Montessori authenticity, and about 35% felt professional development could be

greatly improved, but nearly all (97%) felt that public Montessori has the potential to be sustained and grow in South Carolina.

All of these results will benefit from more detailed scrutiny to determine underlying causes and appropriate interventions or adjustments. The full results can be expected to influence public policy in South Carolina and beyond, and to strongly influence the public Montessori culture in South Carolina with data, professional development, and a drive towards greater fidelity. Individual schools will have access to their data if they wish to pursue it for self-improvement and development. And, perhaps of greatest importance, the breadth and depth of this study can be expected to provide a foundation for significant further research, within South Carolina Montessori and beyond.

* The former Public School Montessorian newspaper, to which MontessoriPublic is the successor, [covered the launch of this study](#) back in 2012.

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About David Ayer

David has worked in Montessori for more than twenty years as a parent, three-to-six year-old and adolescent teacher, administrator, writer, speaker, and advocate. David is married to Elise Huneke-Stone, Director of Elementary Teacher Training at Montessori Northwest, and they live in Portland, Oregon with their family.

COMMENTS



Jyothi Rao Mcminn says

JULY 7, 2016 AT 9:28 PM

Great news and all the best. I have been in Montessori for the last fifty two years and would be happy to share and be a part of this. Let me know if I can help.

[Reply](#)



David Ayer says

JULY 7, 2016 AT 10:13 PM

Thanks for the comment! Follow the blog, sign up for the newsletter, and like us on Facebook to get the updates and boost our signal.

[Reply](#)



Nat Hu says

JULY 19, 2016 AT 12:44 PM

Based on these preliminary outcomes, feedback from all the Montessori teachers should be taken most seriously as they are the ones interacting, teaching and observing students throughout their journey. I truly hope that whatever deficiency they have to overcome will be addressed by the Public School system. For without all the needed tools, then schools aren't letting teachers maximize students' possible potentials. Therefore, to ensure that the Montessori system are implemented correctly, empowerment and provision of whatever that are needed should be met.

@Jyothi Rao Mcminn, is there any way I can PM you directly?

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