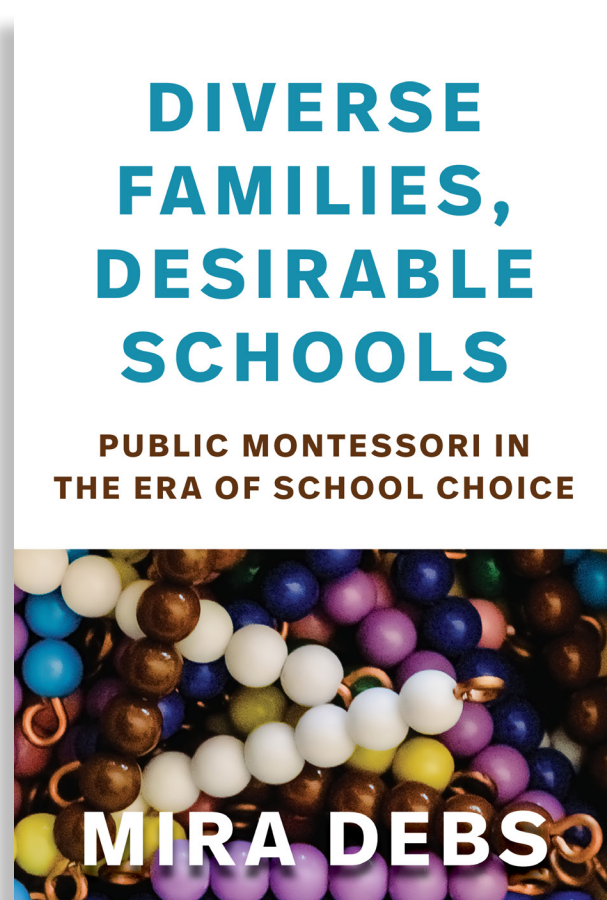


Book Review and Editorial

Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice by *Mira Debs* (Harvard Education Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2019)

David Kahn



Montessori Generational Frontiers: The Times They Are a-Changin’

Montessori in the public sector has a long history beginning in the 1960s. Since then, each unfolding stage represents an evolution that has responded to the needs and context of the times. Dr. Mira Debs, a sociologist who directs Yale University’s Education Studies program, has written a comprehensive and vibrant summary of this evolution in her new book *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice*. It is one of the only books since the 1980s that puts the history of Montessori public schools on the table, and it has stimulated many reflections on my experiences in public sector Montessori from 1980 to 2003, when I served as an organizer for Montessori magnet and charter schools.

Debs first experienced Montessori as a child and parent. She attended a private Montessori school on the South Side of Chicago (Hyde Park) for two years; her daughter attended a Montessori preschool. Debs later intensively stepped into Montessori public sector activity when she worked with a New Haven, Connecticut, parent group to open Elm City Montessori School, a racially and socioeconomically diverse public Montessori charter school. This project led her to conduct an intensive qualitative research study of the parent communities of two Montessori public schools in Hartford, Connecticut, between 2013 and 2015 (school identities are masked to protect the privacy of the research subjects).

I offer this Montessori generational timeline from 1950 to the present as a tool for analysis:

1. **First generation:** True pioneering leaders who knew Maria Montessori and supported her first international diffusion.
2. **Second generation:** Those who knew the first generation and continued a missionary zeal to make Montessori known.
3. **Third generation:** Those, including myself, who had contact with the second generation and operationalized Montessori in the private and public sectors for teachers and administrators.
4. **Fourth generation:** Montessori practitioners with up to fifteen years’ experience. This generation also includes researchers without Montessori training; at this stage, Montessori has become an object of research in different fields (psychology, neurology, sociology, education, and so forth), although the researchers have not necessarily attended a Montessori training.

Emphasizing the Problem of “Fit” for People of Color in 2019

Conversation within the Montessori community in the third generation has focused on the pedagogical fidelity of public Montessori. “The call to stay faithful to the Montessori method has often led educators to define who fits Montessori rather than vice versa. This has raised questions such as, when should educators ‘follow the child’ even if it means deviating from Montessori practice? To what extent can Montessori teachers innovate to adapt to the child’s need? Who has the authority to give a Montessori teacher training?” (Debs, p. 26). Debs’s book is part of fourth-generation thinking about Montessori. In *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools*, she goes beyond racial and socioeconomic diversity to measure schools by additional factors: Is there a sense of well-being, an intuition of belonging, and community equity for underserved people of color? Debs’s writing on Montessori in the public sector and related themes of social justice is well supported by her research and abiding interest in the psychological realities of school. She states the purpose of the book:

[. . .] this book examines why assessing “good fit” matters for creating racially and socioeconomically diverse progressive schools of choice. Within the big tent of progressive education, the Montessori movement is an important case for its robust public education sector over the past fifty years. The book asks several key questions. First, what is the promise of

progressive schools of choice like Montessori as a strategy for supporting diversity and equity? What tensions arise within the district, school community, and classroom that pull against these positive intentions? How can districts and schools counteract the forces that pull progressive schools like Montessori toward elitism? All in all, what does this mean for a choice-based strategy aimed at providing a good fit for every family? (p. 9)

Here, Debs pursues a complex truth about alternative education. She selected Montessori for her research in part because it has larger numbers in the public sector and a more robust body of research of any other single pedagogy. Debs writes, “Studying public Montessori schools allows us to examine one of the most successful choice programs in creating racial and economic diversity. Examining the fragility of such diversity compels us to consider what additional measures are needed at all choice schools to provide equal access and empower *all* students and families” (p. 19).

Montessori for Social Reform

Social reform depends on the solidity of the building principles. Debs references leaders of color who were pioneers in Montessori, which is an important historical contribution of her book. I was lucky to work with many of these principals from the mid-seventies to the nineties. Mae Gadpaille (Boston), Phyllis Williams (Cincinnati), Barbara Booker, Alcillia Clifford (Cleveland), Jacquie Miller (Cleveland), Kim Underwood (Washington, DC), and Martha Urioste (Denver) were inspired by the Montessori prepared developmental environments for *all* children. These principals were in love with Montessori beliefs. They were “true believers” as Debs calls them, fully trained and convinced of Montessori’s larger-than-life integrity of training and materials. They found secure common ground in this whole-school vision. These pioneering firebrands had, and some continue to have, a holistic view of the Montessori prepared environments from birth to twelve. They

were trained advocates asking central offices and funders for the most money obtainable for their children, hoping to deepen their schools’ “Montessori continuum” from birth to adulthood. Teachers and families were joyful about the best Montessori education provided by good training for their school.

Montessori provided teachers with clear working frameworks and materials. Guidelines were firm and clear; the Montessori pioneers in the public sector stood behind a universal standard in Montessori practice with sensitivity and respect for each individual child. The transition from private- to public-sector Montessori seemed an unstoppable social reform. Those Montessori trainers, teachers, administrators, fundraisers, and community volunteers collectively aspired to what Martha Urioste called her Montessori “education plaza” for the Hispanic population of urban Denver. Urioste was a high-profile trained Montessorian and PhD with a trained faculty and full complement of materials. Debs tells the Urioste story with high praise.

Cleveland in the 1980s: A Case History for Montessori in the Public Sector

In 1986 the top priority of Montessori schools was to get authentic Montessori-trained teachers into the public system. I was an experienced implementer in the eighties and nineties when Montessori was relatively new to the public sector. Cleveland had only one Montessori magnet school, which was Montessori in name only, with one Montessori-trained teacher. I complained about this deception to the desegregation monitoring office, which at the time was still supervising the outcomes of the desegregation of the city’s schools, resulting in almost \$100,000 in funds. In addition, we received grants from three of the most significant local foundations to bring AMI training to Cleveland. The Montessori community was gratified to supply the local public schools with well-trained Montessori teachers. Fidelity to Montessori was the community’s aim.

Despite these gains, today Montessori-trained personnel remain scarce in public-sector

Montessori schools. But how can one implement Montessori in the public sector without recognizing the importance of Montessori training for teachers and administrators? Third-generation Montessori teachers and administrators sought understanding for holistic and complete levels of Montessori implementation. Influenced by the enthusiasm for authentic Montessori in public school settings, the third generation saw inclusion of all children with trained Montessori teachers and complete prepared environments as long-awaited equity for the urban underserved. I was always convinced that public schools could achieve the highest standard of Montessori, and I worked with the most enthusiastic Montessori-trained principals of color who supported teachers, parents, and children. They had a comprehensive vision and a positive can-do sentiment, fostered by Montessori's positive psychology.

The interdisciplinary nature of the Montessori cultural program and the long-term contribution of integrated curriculum support a whole vision and the purpose for all Montessori systems of knowledge.

The Cleveland community discovered that providing complete Montessori training resulted in building a unity of mission with an enlightened practical adaptation of Montessori and less teacher turnover. Well-trained teachers changed the average teacher commitment from less than three years (without training) to six years (complete training). The Cleveland district office had an urgent priority: to find an authentically trained teacher supply to support sustainable Montessori.

The “good fit” issues came up early and were addressed by good parent education and accessible well-trained teachers in the founding years. The main issues were the need to demonstrate to central administration, parents, and community stakeholders how excellent implemen-

tation of Montessori led to optimal success for diverse families. This underserved community wanted the best Montessori teacher preparation. They wanted real alternative education. The successful transfer of top-rated classic Montessori to public school families was determined to offer equal-quality opportunity and community-wide benefits. Magnet school grants meant a rerouting of resources for equal implementation of Montessori education in all sectors. The intent was to attract suburban and urban children, hence the designation—magnet schools.

Fidelity vs. Flexibility

The third generation, captivated by Montessori's vision, wanted the best Montessori for all children, regardless of background. But Debs asks the reader to question this school of thought of Montessori fidelity. Debs's constructive view of orthodoxy is clearly stated: “The orthodoxy of AMI has served to keep the fidelity of Montessori practice paramount throughout the Montessori movement, preserving Montessori's distinct tradition at a time when many other progressive education movements have withered away in their doctrinal flexibility” (p. 29).

The strength of AMI training is that, in addition to its core of fidelity, it provides a body of materials that allows for infinite adaptation to all children, consistent with methodology, which will help and not hinder flexibility. AMI's more extensive training offers independent, wiser decision-making for the trainee graduate, preparing them with a better-informed repertoire, a deep emphasis on observation, and an understanding of how Montessori philosophy can guide classroom decisions. This bedrock allows teachers and directors to select pathways to engage their diverse students in a variety of ways.

What about social reform and Montessori? The Montessori keys for change include social justice and individual dignity as sensitive periods for adolescents. During these sensitive periods, the child develops the full strength of their personality through the nobility of purposeful work, leading to a strong adolescent at the end of Montessori education. The interdisciplinary



nature of the Montessori cultural program and the long-term contribution of integrated curriculum support a whole vision and the *purpose* for all Montessori systems of knowledge.

Generally speaking, all well-trained Montessori teachers must ask themselves how much direction comes from the teacher and how much comes from the observed needs of the child. This is one of many purposes of the orthodox training's focus on observation informed by Montessori psychology-methodology. All Montessori teachers who know their basics ask themselves this deep question.

Debs suggests that the Montessori orthodoxy is rigid and may be hard on less privileged children. She has observed that when the focus is on ideal Montessori, there is always the tendency to exclude children who might cause struggle in the Montessori classroom. However, researchers have shown how, in the case of Montessori education, the more completely the method is implemented, the more adaptable it becomes to all kind of abilities, backgrounds, and interests (Tackas, 1993). The Montessori method was originally designed to engage some of the most challenging forms of "being different," that is, situations of extreme poverty and mental difference. It then grew into a pedagogy that accommodates and fosters all kinds of diversity.

Debs raises a related point of critique, which is reasonable but not comprehensive, when she suggests that because Montessori teacher training programs developed separately from the university system, they may have inadvertently perpetuated a white teaching majority who could afford to pay for their training. I would say that, despite all the efforts for funding and scholarships, more public support would make trainings more affordable and open to all.

Montessori's developmental tradition supports a holistic vision of human growth. The pedagogy skillfully deals with the exercise of global vision in relation to its parts. The Montessori manipulatives are designed to avoid cultural bias. The cultural stories are

humanity's story, beginning with the big bang and evolving into life on Earth. The elementary history begins with the origin of the universe. The emphasis on the history fables, prehuman narratives, and more recent history rises above prejudicial, anthropocentric teaching. Montessori presentations explore particular cultures in relation to the anthropological theme of human connectedness and human unity through universal tendencies. This rich curriculum examines the universal learning characteristics of each stage of development: moral, social, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and emotional. This provides a structure for *all* developmental stages about what's human about humans.

Angeline Lillard, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, is an authority on learning and development. She shares her research on outcomes with reference to the question of fidelity. The following excerpt is from her article, "Preschool Children's Development in Classic Montessori, Supplemented Montessori, and Conventional Programs," published in the *Journal of School Psychology* in 2012.

Research on the outcomes of Montessori education is scarce and results are inconsistent. One possible reason for the inconsistency is variations in Montessori implementation fidelity. To test whether outcomes vary according to implementation fidelity, we examined preschool children enrolled in high fidelity classic Montessori programs, lower fidelity Montessori programs that supplemented the program with conventional school activities, and, for comparison, conventional programs. Children were tested at the start and end of the school year on a range of social and academic skills. Although they performed no better in the fall, children in classic Montessori programs, as compared with children in supplemented Montessori and conventional programs, showed significantly greater schoolyear gains on outcome measures of executive function, reading, math, vocabulary, and social problem-solving, suggesting that high fidelity Montessori implementation is associated with better

Credit: Courtesy Elm City Montessori School

outcomes than lower fidelity Montessori programs or conventional programs.

Best Practices for Equitable and Diverse Public Montessori Schools

Debs has systematically researched obstacles of socioeconomic diversity in the Montessori urban magnet and charter school systems. Her appendices include a thoughtful and precise list of “Best Practices for Equitable and Diverse Public Montessori Schools” which, if adopted, could support and reassure the families of students of different races and economic levels. Steps include having conversations about these issues, making schools accessible, reaching out to the school community, and creating schools with diverse staff. A second appendix, “Best Practices for Family Engagement in Equitable and Diverse Schools,” is a valuable template for building community with families and students. Debs has documented that good professional development workshops, ABAR (Anti-Bias and Anti-Racist) practices, culturally sensitive parent education, and inclusion techniques offer important resources for Montessori professionals. Montessori societies should be vetting these workshop opportunities about widening of Montessori design so all children benefit.

Dr. Debs and I agree that Montessori training is not enough for successful public-sector implementation. As a Montessori “womb to tomb” believer, I know that Montessori does not have all the answers for American public schools. Montessori pedagogy cannot be expected to turn around the vicissitudes of a racist society. Montessori pedagogy cannot eliminate a privileged social hierarchy that is embedded in school systems, segregated neighborhoods, or white middle class-dominated parent-teacher organizations. No pedagogy is foolproof in the face of public system erosion of Montessori with limited resources to keep alternative schools open or to train teachers for their schools. Debs reminds us that Montessori implementation can only do good Montessori programming in a system where social justice and administrative inclusion are established

first in order for Montessori to take proper root. She has graciously led the way in monitoring this balance, the importance of which is made clear in public Montessori’s 50-year revolution in education.

The Milwaukee Public Montessori Schools are one of the oldest and most stable Montessori alternatives in public districts. Phillip Dosmann, a retired 30-year veteran of Montessori in the Milwaukee schools, served as teacher, principal, and advocate. He offered a short answer on the Milwaukee challenges in 2019 in a phone interview:

Families of color and low socioeconomic status tend to choose schools where there are other families that are experiencing the same struggles. The success of their schools depends on quality leadership and teachers who are committed to serving their students. Schools can build a community where all feel welcome and no one is singled out due to poverty or trauma. Montessori programs that serve children in poverty need more resources, more professional development, and more support for families. The Montessori school has to provide a wrap-around program that serves the entire family.

My original encounter with the question of Montessori reform on terms of fidelity and completeness for the Montessori method came from Camillo Grazzini, my trainer and mentor in 1971–72 in Bergamo, Italy. Camillo was a second-generation trainer who worked with Mario Montessori to develop the elementary training. He spoke about Montessori reform before his death on January 26, 2004:

I believe that Montessori in the last 50 years has yet to reach its aim. If we read the Montessori theory in her books, we realize that the Montessori reform has yet to be implemented fully. When I speak of reform, I speak about the Montessori revolution in education. When I speak of revolution, I speak of radical action. But

the radical action has not been implemented. Instead, the less disturbing and more acceptable parts of Montessori have been borrowed from the more difficult parts of her tradition. We got to the smoke of Montessori, and not the fire, not the real Montessori revolution.

Montessori-educated adults and children will lead educational reform for global systems. All families benefit from Montessori education, to which Dr. Debs adds, “Progressive public schools of choice, and ideally, all public schools, need to both follow the child and follow the family, empowering diverse families to come together and take action for the betterment of their community’s children” (p. 156). Debs is a Yale professor who cares deeply about the grassroots evolution of Montessori in the public sector and its future, broadening the Montessori mission to the greater whole of social reality schools and in the preparation of teachers.

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