Experiences of Montessori Guides and Administrators Supporting Students with Developmental Delays or Disabilities

EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF THE AGES AND STAGES QUESTIONNAIRES TRAINING ON MONTESSORI GUIDES AND ADMINISTRATORS SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS OR DISABILITIES

Brief Report
An Evaluation Conducted by Dr. Elyse L. Postlewaite

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This project was made possible through the support of the Association Montessori International/USA (AMI/USA). The current report reflects a deep interest of the Montessori community in strengthening systems and supports for students who are neurodivergent, have special needs, or have developmental disabilities or delays. I express appreciation to the leadership of AMI/USA for initiating this important work. This study would not have been possible without the partnership of Dalia Avello, the trainer for the Ages and Stages Questionnaires in a Montessori Setting as well as the course assistants Michelle Lane-Barmapov, Bobbe Spink, Barbara A Luborsky, Catherine Massie, Nancy Leon, Michelle Blaya Burgo, Liliana Kennedy, Erin Lopez-Brooks, Anne Gray, Erin Taylor, and Michael Bagiackas. I also recognize the collaboration of many members of the Montessori community who provided input or participated in this study including Catherine Massie and many others. In addition, I express my gratitude to Serena Chapman for her thoughtful feedback and careful editing.

The following is a brief report; please refer to the full evaluation report for complete details.
Overview

Early developmental and social-emotional milestones play a crucial role in shaping the optimal development and thriving of children. However, a significant number of developmental disabilities and delays go undetected, potentially hindering children from reaching their full potential (Weitzman et al., 2015). Extensive research highlights the benefits of universal early screening and intervention emphasizing the importance of timely identification and support, while also shedding light on the potential consequences of neglecting such measures (Hirai et al., 2018; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). To address this critical issue, the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) has emerged as a set of widely used research-based universal developmental screening tools (Bricker et al., 2010; Macy, 2012; McCrae & Brown, 2018).

Specifically designed to identify developmental delays among children aged 0 to 6, the ASQ enables trained guides to detect delays, engage in vital and often challenging conversations with parents, and ensure that children receive the appropriate interventions, resources, and support they require. In partnership with their child’s school, the ASQ is an assessment tool that parents complete about their children’s behaviors and abilities. Parents return completed protocols to the school for guides and/or administrators to score. Based on the child’s set of scores, a student may be identified as benefiting from further diagnosis testing and support, which the guides or administrators discuss with the parents. Parents can use the information from the ASQ to have further conversations with their child’s pediatrician.

Over the past several years, with support from key Association Montessori International/USA (AMI/USA) leaders, many Montessori schools have adopted the ASQ as a tool to screen young children for developmental delays, engage in important conversations with parents, and ensure appropriate support is provided to children in need. Although research highlights the positive benefits of using such a screener (Bellman et al., 2013; Hirai et al., 2018), it remains unclear how Montessori guides and administrators perceive potential benefits and challenges associated with implementing the ASQ. As such, the aims of the present evaluation study are threefold:

1. To investigate the current realities and needs of Montessori community partners in supporting students with developmental disabilities or delays.
2. To assess Montessori guide and administrator attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, confidence, and self-efficacy around using universal screeners to support students with developmental disabilities or delays as well as the extent to which they believe they have requisite the tools and resources they need before and after completing an ASQ training.
3. To highlight associated benefits or challenges of implementing the ASQ training and tool as an aid for Montessori guides and administrators in supporting students with developmental disabilities or delays.

Evaluation Design & Methods

Evaluation Design

To address the evaluation questions, the study featured a mixed method, pre/post design. Quantitative methods included Likert-style, self-report response items on a pre-survey, post-survey, and post-only survey, which provided numerical scores for guides’ and administrators’ attitudes, beliefs, confidence, and perceived skills...
around identifying and supporting young students with developmental delays or disabilities. Qualitative methods included open-ended survey questions and focus groups with Montessori guides and administrators.

**Procedures**

A group of Montessori teachers and administrators were recruited via email to participate in an online ASQ training that had been adapted for the Montessori setting in January 2023. Before and after participating in the training, participants completed a survey about their attitudes, beliefs, confidence, and perceived skills around identifying and supporting young students with developmental delays or disabilities. The post-survey was intentionally delayed by about four to six weeks after the training to ensure that participants in the training had time and opportunity to implement the learnings from their training in their respective school settings. Additionally, a sample of participants (ASQ alumni) who engaged in the ASQ training over the last several years (before the January 2023 training) were recruited via email to take a post-only survey. The ASQ alumni were selected because they had several years of accumulated time and experience with using the ASQ resources that they could report on. Finally, focus group participants were invited to participate if they had completed the post-survey or the post-only survey. They were asked to reflect on their attitudes toward universal screeners, how their experiences supporting students with developmental disabilities or delays had changed since completing the ASQ training, and any benefits or challenges of implementing the ASQ in their respective school settings.

**Sample**

A total of 67 participants completed the ASQ pre-survey and training and had an average age of 44.7 (SD = 10.4) ranging from 23 to 70. A total of 45 participants completed the ASQ post-survey and had an average age of 47.1 (SD = 7.78) ranging from 28 to 69. A total of 27 participants completed the post-only survey and had an average age of 47.7 (SD = 10.2) ranging from 35 to 68. A total of 20 guides and administrators participated in the focus groups. All participants (100%) were female and had an average age of 50.5 (SD = 9.95) ranging from 37 to 69. Most focus group participants were White/Caucasian (55%). A total of 13 U.S. states were represented by participants. The average number of years participants had been an educator was 18.7 (SD = 7.51). Most participants had previously completed a specialized course in developmental delays or disabilities (65%) while 35% had never completed any specialized coursework besides a child development course. Additional demographics and background characteristics about the sample can be found in the full report.

**Results & Findings**

**EQ1: What are the realities and needs of community members in Montessori schools who serve students with developmental disabilities or delays?**

Montessori guides and administrators reported on their experiences supporting students with developmental disabilities and delays. Findings from thematic content analysis uncovered the **realities** and **needs** of Montessori guides and administrators, which are presented in Figures 1 and 2 and discussed below. In the figures, larger circles represent more frequently reported themes while smaller circles represent less frequently reported themes.
According to participants in the study, the increasing number of students with special needs requiring additional support has created a pressing demand for effective solutions. However, the available resources have not kept pace with these needs, resulting in a strain on policies, finances, and staff. Guides in the study reported that they often shoulder the responsibility of supporting students with special needs in under-resourced schools, leading to concerns about providing adequate assistance or having sufficient training. There can also be a pervasive fear of blame from all involved with supporting students with developmental disabilities or delays including with guides, administration, parents, and leadership—a relic of historic challenges.

Despite these challenges, guides in the study demonstrated remarkable dedication and most reported taking personal initiative to seek additional resources, training, and support. They reported feeling a moral obligation to identify each student's unique needs and tailor the classroom experience accordingly. While the Montessori pedagogy and training were seen as valuable tools for individualizing instruction, adhering to the standards and practices was sometimes perceived by participants in the study as a barrier to providing necessary support for students with special needs.

The study also identified specific needs expressed by guides and administrators (Figure 2.). Additional specialized training and ongoing professional development were highlighted as crucial for supporting and managing students with special needs. Participants emphasize the importance of staying updated with evidence-based strategies. They also called for adaptable, flexible, and aligned systems within the Montessori framework to support all types of learners. Establishing trusting relationships with service providers and involving
Montessori trainers in understanding present needs were seen as essential steps. A community-based approach that distributes the workload and involves all members was deemed crucial. Participants also stressed the importance of specialized staff dedicated to supporting students with special needs, as well as the need for support groups and opportunities for guides to connect and learn from one another.

**Figure 2. Reported Needs of Montessori Guides and Administrators**

**EQ2: What are the perceptions and experiences of Montessori guides and administrators regarding the support they provide to students with developmental disabilities or delays before and after completing the ASQ in a Montessori Setting training?**

Results from quantitative analyses indicated that completing the ASQ training positively impacted guides' and administrators' attitudes, beliefs, skills, knowledge, confidence, and self-efficacy, as well as access to tools and resources related to detecting and supporting students with developmental delays or disabilities (Figures 3-6). In addition, participants sustained positive effects of the training over time when comparing the January 2023 participants to the Alumni group.

**Figure 3. Pre, Post, and Post-Only Mean Scores for Attitudes and Beliefs toward Universal Screeners for ASQ Trained Participants**

**Figure 4. Pre, Post, and Post-Only Mean Scores in Skills and Knowledge for ASQ Trained Participants**
EQ3: What are the perceived benefits and challenges of the implementation and use of the ASQ by Montessori community members?

Findings from qualitative analyses revealed that Montessori guides and administrators in the study perceived the ASQ training and tool as beneficial, enabling early detection, and facilitating communication with parents (Figure 7). The ASQ was seen as a reliable and externally validated tool that normalized the screening process and provided valuable information and resources for guides, parents, and families. The training increased participants' confidence and self-efficacy, empowering them to support students more effectively.

Figure 7. Reported Benefits of Implementing and Using the ASQ
Implementing the ASQ also presented challenges, such as bandwidth and logistical concerns, resistance to change from families, and the need for buy-in and training among colleagues (Figure 8). Participants emphasized the importance of seamless support systems and collaboration within the school community to address these challenges and ensure successful implementation.

Figure 8. Reported Challenges of Implementing and Using the ASQ

It certainly requires a commitment of time and some costs for materials and staff time to prepare screening materials to go to parents, scoring and tracking them... but it was worth it.

And we're trying to kind of normalize all of this so that people don't feel so offended, because right now what we're getting is some families are okay with having these conversations and then we have a few who they become offended and they leave.

The biggest challenge is having families complete and return the forms... Not all families want to or are able to fill it out... Some families have a difficult time following the entire process, following instructions.

We still have work to do to encourage our teachers and help them feel confident in using the tools.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the ASQ training and tool were perceived by Montessori guides and administrators as valuable for detecting and supporting students with developmental delays or disabilities. The training positively influenced participants' attitudes, beliefs, skills, knowledge, confidence, self-efficacy, and access to resources. Addressing the challenges and needs identified in this study is crucial including the establishment of a culture of trust, provision of specialized training and support, alignment of systems and resources, integration of inclusive practices within the Montessori framework, and implementation of universal screening tools like the ASQ. By addressing these issues, schools and educators can better support students with developmental disabilities or delays and foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Recommendations

Montessori school leaders, administrators, policymakers, trainers, consultants, and guides/teachers should acknowledge and address the increased need and urgency to support students with developmental disabilities or delays. Based on the study findings and conclusions, the following sets of recommendations are provided for community members.

Montessori Guides

- Have conversations with school personnel and parents/families about students who may need special support early and often.
- Develop a plan of support for students with special needs with administration, specialized staff, parents, and available resources.
- Establish trusting relationships with service providers to ensure coordinated support for students with special needs.

**Montessori Administrators**

- Provide additional and ongoing specialized training and professional development opportunities for guides and administrators to effectively support and manage students with special needs.
- Sustain the positive effects of the ASQ training over time by providing ongoing support and reinforcement.
- Foster a culture of trust and collaboration among guides, administrators, and parents to promote transparent communication and collaboration.
- Work to align systems and resources to support all types of learners, including students with special needs.
- Establish specialized professional staff positions, such as directors of inclusion or school-wide occupational therapists, dedicated to supporting students with special needs; or implement a community-based approach that distributes the workload and involves all members in supporting students with developmental disabilities or delays.

**Montessori Trainers**

- Ensure that training programs are responsive to the current needs and realities and include training on evidence-based strategies for supporting neurodivergent students and those with developmental disabilities or delays.

**Montessori Leaders and Policy Makers**

- Provide adaptable, flexible, and aligned systems within the Montessori framework, policies, and practice standards to support all types of learners, including students with special needs wherever possible.
- Work closely with Montessori recognition organizations to promote inclusive practices (e.g., make universal screening a requirement or recommendation alongside the Montessori recognition process). By aligning policies and practices, schools can enhance the credibility and consistency of their inclusive policies.
- Involve Montessori trainers in understanding the present needs of educators and aligning requirements and policies accordingly.
- Create specialized support groups and opportunities for guides and school personnel to connect and learn from each other.