The work of Montessori nurseries in underserved areas of England

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July 2023

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"The child is both a hope and a promise for mankind." Maria Montessori

Acknowledgements

Foreword

From the first moment I became CEO of Montessori Global Education in 2018, I realised the power of the Montessori approach to change lives for the most disadvantaged children globally. Dr Maria Montessori herself, showed us the way in which we can give children the opportunity to fulfil their potential, regardless of their backgrounds. As a child of a refugee family myself, I am a living example of the power of quality early years education to change the life of a child.

I also realised that there is a significant misperception, one that I come across daily, that Montessori is only for the elite, for those who can afford private education and expensive settings for their children.

Therefore, Nathan Archer's research on the reach of Montessori in diverse and low-income communities in the UK is much needed and timely. We need research like this to convince policy makers and other stakeholders, that supporting early childhood education is not just a desirable, but essential if we are to support families and foster social justice. If we are to create a healthy and equitable society.

His clear recommendations are a call to action to all of us – Montessorians and non-Montessorians – who believe in giving children the tools and opportunities to live fulfilling lives and to become future leaders, citizens and rounded, healthy adults.

This research is an important piece of work for those of us who are trying to create a better future for all children.

Leonor Diaz Alcantara, **CEO of Montessori Global Education**

1.Executive Summary

Context

In England, Montessori schools and nurseries have traditionally been associated with affluent areas, and there is a widespread (mis)conception that this approach is the preserve of 'middle class children' (BBC 2016). In reality, a number of Montessori nurseries and pre-schools operate across the UK including in diverse and more socio-economically disadvantaged[1] areas. Therefore, it is timely and important to consider the work of Montessorians in diverse and low-income communities and to understand perceptions of this educational approach by key stakeholders.

In 2023 Montessori nurseries, as with all early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, continue to experience a number of strategic and operational challenges. A difficult economic climate, recovery from COVID, long term underfunding and staff recruitment challenges (Department for Education 2023), negatively affect Montessori nurseries as any other setting. These challenges are likely to be exacerbated in low-income areas (Ofsted 2022).

Whilst Montessori ECEC centres in low-income areas are few in number, their work has been undertaken 'under the radar' and it is important to consider the scope and impact of this approach in underserved communities. This research seeks to highlight the work of Montessori nurseries in such low-income areas, shining a spotlight on the work of leaders and educators, their impact and the perceptions of families using these settings.

This report focusses on the interviews with leaders, with analysis of data from parent/carer interviews to follow.

Research Questions

- What were the motivations of setting owners/leaders for establishing Montessori provision in a disadvantaged area?
- What are the benefits and challenges to children, families and setting leaders of offering Montessori education in a disadvantaged area?

Methodology

Interviews with the leaders and managers (n=9) of five Montessori settings in socio-economically disadvantaged areas were undertaken between Dec 2022 – February 2023. In January 2023 individual online surveys were issued to each of these settings. Setting leaders disseminated the link to these online surveys to parents of children attending their settings. 31 parents/carers responded anonymously, and these data will be reported separately.

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[1] 'Socio-economic disadvantage involves a complex interaction of a wide range of factors from poverty to health, education, limited social mobility, housing and a lack of expectations. Someone who experiences socio-economic disadvantage may be income deprived, live in a deprived area and/or belong to a community of interest that disproportionately experience poverty and social inequality.' (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2018. p.4)

Key points from findings

Values-led Leadership - Inspired by the origins of Montessori education

Montessori leaders in underserved areas enact values-based leadership inspired by Montessori's early work in a low-income area of Rome. They are advocates and local champions for children and families. Whilst they are well connected with other leaders online, they are experiencing less face-to-face opportunities to connect with others and share issues and challenges. More research is needed to better understand Montessori leaders support needs.

Responsibility and Service - Driven by a sense of equity and social justice

These centres and leaders also cater for a 'social mix' of children from backgrounds across the household income spectrum. Further research is needed to better understand the nature and impact of 'social mixing' of children from differing socio-economic backgrounds on the outcomes of all children in a group.

Connectedness and Unrecognised labour: supporting the family and the child

Montessori nurseries are rooted in and deeply connected to their local community. Significant unrecognised labour in the form of informal family support is offered by Montessori leaders. More detailed case studies to better understand the extent of this work would support lobbying for additional resources.

Learning for Life - Rewriting the school readiness narrative

Montessori leaders challenged conventional notions of 'school readiness'. Developing an environment and pedagogy with children's independence and agency as a priority was at the core of the work of all these leaders. It is recommended that a platform or opportunities to further explore, debate and create alternatives to the notion of 'school readiness' from a Montessori perspective are created.

2.Introduction

In England, early childhood education and care (ECEC) are offered by a diverse range of settings: state maintained, private and voluntary organisations including local authorities, schools, charities, social enterprises and limited companies and self-employed childminders. These settings are broadly divided into the maintained sector (nursery schools and nursery classes), and the private, voluntary and independent sector (including day nurseries, pre-schools and childminders) (Archer and Oppenheim 2021).

Within this landscape Montessori nurseries are overwhelmingly run by private and voluntary providers, usually as single site, or small group operations. Historically, they have been situated in more affluent areas, although not exclusively. This research seeks to highlight the work of Montessori settings in low-income communities of England.

Key features of the current landscape

A number of key features of the current ECEC landscape are important context for this study. Given the focus on socio-economically disadvantaged areas, it is important to highlight how the current policy and economic contexts affects these areas in particular. The following sections offer an overview of recent studies on:

- Finances and sustainability of ECEC provision
- Access and take up of funded ECEC provision
- Quality of ECEC provision
- Serving the most disadvantaged children
- Support for children with SEND
- Workforce challenges

Finances and sustainability of ECEC provision

Recent years of government underfunding (Early Years Alliance 2020), an era of economic austerity and the COVID pandemic have severely impacted the sustainability of ECEC provision in England (Hardy et al 2021). The finances of providers were already weak in several parts of the sector before the pandemic. Despite government support to the sector during COVID-19, temporary setting closures and reduced parental demand for ECEC have increased financial pressures and sector leaders have raised concerns about the pandemic's long-term impact on financial sustainability. Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, there was a net overall decrease of around 4,000 providers (Ofsted 2022). During the height of the pandemic, 34.5% of all closures (01 April 2020 – 31 March 2021) were in areas that are among the most deprived 30% places in England. This is compared to 27.2% of all closures that were in the 30% of least deprived areas (National Day Nurseries Association 2021)

Notably, in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, these difficulties have been exacerbated as cost of living challenges have impacted (Early Years Alliance 2023) , difficulty in recruiting a well-qualified ECEC workforce has increased (Department for Education 2022) and supporting the needs of children with SEND (particularly post COVID) are challenging due to under resourcing (Early Years Alliance 2022). Montessori nurseries have not been immune from these pressures.

Access to and take up of funded ECEC provision

ECEC policy in England has evolved over recent decades and now includes a series of 'funded entitlement' offers for young children. As of June 2023, these were:

- 15 hours per week term time only funded entitlement to an ECEC place for disadvantaged two-year-olds.

- 15 hours per week term time only universal funded entitlement to an ECEC place for all three and four-year-olds.

- Extended 30 hours per week term time only funded entitlement to an ECEC place for three and four-years-olds of eligible working parents.

However, there are inequalities in access to and take up of funded provision. [Archer and Oppenheim (2021)](#) note:

- *Although 93% of three- and four-year-olds accessed their 15 funded hours a week in 2019, the most disadvantaged families are least likely to take-up their places. Take-up is also lower among children from some ethnic minority backgrounds, and among children with English as an additional language and those with SEND.*

- *In some cases, policies designed to increase provision for working parents have inadvertently accentuated disadvantage, such as the 30-hour policy, which effectively gives children of higher-earning parents double the amount of funded early education than many disadvantaged children.*

- *Support targeted specifically at disadvantaged children, such as funded places for two-year-olds, is subject to wide regional variations in take-up, and close to a third of eligible children are not accessing these places.*

Access to ECEC places is determined by a number of factors, including availability (close proximity to home or parents' work), capacity and affordability of local provision and eligibility for state funded hours or 'free childcare'. Lack of affordable early childhood education and care is also a key barrier for parents, compounding socioeconomic inequalities (Gromada et al 2021). There are no available data pertaining specifically to access and take up of places in Montessori settings.

Serving the most disadvantaged children

Research shows that quality ECEC has the capacity to narrow the disadvantage gap, including inequalities in cognitive and socio-emotional development and the gap in educational attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers (Green et al 2021; Melhuish 2004). High-quality ECEC is associated with improved language, cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Research (Early Education 2020) found:

- *Funding levels to address children living in deprived circumstances varied considerably across settings and in different parts of the country.*

- *Settings reported that the number of children living in poverty had increased since 2015.*

- *For some settings, the numbers of children in poverty remained unchanged yet levels of poverty had increased. Levels of in-work poverty in families with young children were rising.*

- *Without doubt, increased funding would make a difference to how settings can support families who experience poverty. Settings were clear about what would make the most difference including: how funding was allocated and to whom; the need for improvements in public services (Social Care, NHS, housing, benefits) which had been reduced through government cuts; support for families on child development; building a multidisciplinary team; more funding for children with Special Educational Needs and who are disabled; practical support and resources for families.*

- *Many settings felt that the need to respond to support families living in poverty was changing the role of the educator.*

However, children from the most disadvantaged families are the least likely to access the funded entitlements to ECEC hours. There is substantial variation in take-up of the disadvantaged entitlement for two year olds between and within local authority areas, ranging from 39% to 88% between LAs in 2021 (Archer and Oppenheim 2021). Take-up may be limited by access to places and differences in the type of providers offering funded places to 2-yearolds. Disadvantaged families may also be less likely to take up the entitlements because of the extra charges required by some nurseries.

Support for children with SEND

According to the Department for Education's (Department for Education 2021) *Provision for children under five years of age in England: January 2021*, 6.3% of three- and four-year-olds and 3.5% of two-year-olds accessing the 15- hour funded entitlement have special educational needs (SEN), as do 2.8% of three- and four-year-olds accessing the extended (30-hour) funded entitlement. However, these statistics do not include children with disabilities, nor do they include children with SEN who are not accessing the funded entitlement.

Lack of support for children with SEND has been criticised by sector organisation Early Years Alliance (2022):

> *92% of respondents to a survey (early years providers) have had to fund additional support for children with SEND out of their own pockets, with 53% saying they do so 'regularly'. Of those that have had to fund additional support themselves,84% said it has had a negative financial impact on their setting. 40% said they do not receive any funding specifically to support SEND provision.*

Quality of ECEC provision

The quality of ECEC in England has improved over the last decade, (as measured by Ofsted inspection grades) and quality of provision was similar across advantaged and disadvantaged areas. (Melhuish 2018). However, research (Archer and Merrick 2020) questions whether Government policies prioritise quantity over quality of ECEC places and that such policies may in fact be widening the disadvantage gap.

Longitudinal studies have explored the impact of high-quality early education in recent years: EPPSE (Sylva et al 2004)[2] and SEED[3] (Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. 2020). In terms of Montessori education in early childhood, there has been research into the quality and impact (e.g., Lillard et al 2006, Marshall 2017). However, whilst there is a growing body of European research in the field, very little is known about the provision of Montessori education in more socio economically disadvantaged areas in the UK. In particular, there is no research which captures the voices and experiences of educators and parents/carers from these areas about the socio-economic 'reach' of the setting and perceived impact of a Montessori preschool education.

Workforce challenges

There is a strong relationship between the level of staff qualifications and the quality of early childhood education and care, but despite cumulative reforms, qualification levels in England still vary across the ECEC sector. In the private, voluntary and independent sector, the proportion of staff with an NVQ Level 3 qualification fell from 83% in 2014/15 to 52% in 2018/19 (NDNA 2019).

Prior to the pandemic, there were long-term issues recruiting and retaining staff, especially highly qualified staff. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic and some stakeholders have expressed concerns that this could compromise the quality of ECEC in the long term (The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology 2021).

In terms of qualifications in Montessori settings, the most recent research (Payler and Bennett 2020) highlights:

> *Well qualified, experienced Montessori staff and higher Ofsted ratings*
> *• The Montessori workforce has a higher proportion of staff at level 3 or above than the general*
> *ECEC workforce in England and a higher proportion of staff with level 6 or above qualifications,*
> *although the picture is slightly complicated by differing means of collecting data.*
> *• More Montessori staff have been with their employer for over five years than across the general*
>
> *Threats to maintaining qualification levels, difficulties in professional development and poor external recognition of Montessori qualifications*
> *• There appears to be a falling proportion of Montessori staff with PGCE/QTS/EYT compared to Montessori staff in 2013.*
> *• Slightly fewer Montessori staff were studying for qualifications than the general ECEC workforce, against a national pattern of falling rates.*
> *• A range of difficulties are faced in Montessori settings regarding professional development. These are mainly high costs, staff cover, poor timing of courses, access to courses and difficulties in deciding which courses are worth doing. There appeared to be fewer accessible choices for professional development at greater costs and with less assurance of making the right choices for quality enhancement and value.*
> *• Access to Montessori training, access to qualified Montessori staff for recruitment, and*

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[2] The Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education study (EPPSE) and its earlier incarnation, Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE), a longitudinal study of 3,000 children in pre-school (at age 3) in 1997 and followed until 2014.
[3] The study of early education and development (SEED) evaluates the:
- effect of early education on children's outcomes
- quality of provision
- value for money of providing funded early years education

recognition and support for Montessori qualifications outside Montessori were all felt to be challenging and in need of improvement.

ECEC workforce, with staff primarily leaving for family reasons or improved pay in a different sector.
• The Montessori workforce appears to be slightly higher paid than the general ECEC workforce, although up-to-date comparisons are difficult to make. This may reflect the higher proportions of older, more experienced and more highly qualified staff in the Montessori workforce.
• Recruitment of Montessori qualified staff is expensive and difficult to achieve, with suggestions that there was a shortage of Montessori qualified staff available.

Despite these significant challenges, ECEC settings including Montessori nurseries continue to provide for some of the most disadvantaged young children.

This research contributes to a small body of research which reflects the experiences of Montessorians and families accessing Montessori settings in the UK. It seeks to address the gap in understanding around the nature of Montessori provision in socio economically disadvantaged areas and the experiences of those who work in these settings and those who access early education there.

It is intended that this research will be of interest not only to the Montessori community but to the wider education community including those both familiar with and those new to Montessori education. It is also hoped that this research will be of interest to the wider public and seek to address misconceptions about the Montessori approach to education being the preserve of more affluent areas only.

Research Questions

- What were the motivations of setting owners/leaders for establishing Montessori provision in a disadvantaged area?

- What are the benefits and challenges to children, families and setting leaders of offering Montessori education in a disadvantaged area?

3. Methodology

This study took a qualitative, interpretive approach to answering the research questions. As an exploratory study, the aim is to provide preliminary information and generate new evidence for further investigation and to build or revise theory. This study is derived from interview and survey data and also draws out common themes across the data sets.

The data comprises:

- Administrative data from the IMD, Ofsted reports, setting website to establish the socio-economic status/level of deprivation of the locality of each setting and features of the operations of the setting.

- Semi-structured Interviews with key stakeholders: Owners, leaders, managers, educators of study settings

- Online Survey of Parents (to be reported separately).

Ethical considerations

Research design, data collection and analysis were approached with cognisance of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines. Ethical approval was secured through Leeds Beckett University Ethical approval process (ref 97423).

Informed consent was secured through participant information sheets and signed consent forms for interviews. Online surveys included online information sheets and consent forms at the beginning of the survey. Right to withdraw at any point was made clear.

Data protection is governed by institution and GDPR processes. Confidentiality was assured relating to any personal, identifying information provided by participants from the interview data. In addition, anonymity was assured through surveys, collecting data without obtaining any personal, identifying information (or deleted if provided). On reporting, data has been fully anonymised with geographical markers deleted to minimise the possibility of identification.

Establishing degrees of deprivation

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is the official measure of relative deprivation in England and is part of a suite of outputs that form the Indices of Deprivation (IoD). It follows an established methodological framework in broadly defining deprivation to encompass a wide range of an individual's living conditions.

Lower-Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) are small areas designed to be of a similar population size, with an average of approximately 1,500 residents or 650 households. There are 32,844 Lower-layer LSOAs in England. LSOAs are a standard statistical geography produced by the Office for National Statistics for the reporting of small area statistics.

The Indices of Deprivation 2019 explorer shows the relative deprivation of neighbourhoods for selected areas according to the indices of deprivation 2019. LSOAs are clustered into deciles from 10% most disadvantaged to 10% most advantaged communities. This online tool allows users to search for a LSOA by postcode. This tool was used to ascertain the level of deprivation of the community in which the study nurseries were based.

Sample settings

The lack of a comprehensive census or database of Montessori nurseries in England (or the wider UK) and the small number of settings by eligibility criteria (socio-economic disadvantage), meant that purposive sampling for participant settings was required. Researchers sent out information about the research study via social media and received few replies. Those that replied did not meet the criteria of being in at least the 40% most disadvantaged communities. Individual settings were identified and selected based on the knowledge of researchers and the settings location in a low-income area. Eight settings were approached to participate and five agreed to join the study.

Data collection: Interviews and survey

Interviews with setting leaders and managers were arranged via MS Teams. Interviews with two leaders undertaken for four participating nurseries and one interview for the leader of the fifth nursery were completed.

An online survey (MS Forms) was devised for each of the five participating settings. A URL link was sent to setting managers to distribute to parents of children attending each nursery. They shared this via email and their private social media groups. A six-week window was allocated for responses. Anonymous responses were collated in MS forms software.

Analytical procedure

Thematic analysis of qualitative data was undertaken using NVivo 12 Plus which provides tools for storing and coding qualitative data. Themes were derived from close reading of response transcriptions imported into NVivo from the survey data, paying attention to similar words, phrases or meanings according to relevance to the research aims and objectives.

Indicative quotations from participants' responses are used to convey the range of the content of themes and sub-codes, to provide more nuanced understanding and to foreground participant voices, each followed by the participant's number (e.g., Nursery Leader 1 – NL A1).

Summary Nursery context

Case study	Community	Governance	Established	Ofsted grade
Nursery A	40% most disadvantaged neighbourhood bordering 10% most deprived neighbourhood	Single site nursery Private limited Company	32 years	Good
Nursery B	40% most deprived closely bordering 10% most deprived neighbourhoods	Single site nursery Private limited Company	23 years	Outstanding
Nursery C	40% most disadvantaged neighbourhood	Small nursery group Community Interest Company	14 years	Good

Nursery D	40% most disadvantaged area bordering more advantaged areas.	Single site nursery Private limited Company	7 years	Outstanding
Nursery E	40% most disadvantaged neighbourhood bordering 20% and 10% most deprived neighbourhood	Small nursery group Private limited Company	20 years	Outstanding

4. Findings

This section details the themes, supported by illustrative data, which were discerned from interviews with Montessori setting leaders. Parent survey data will be reported separately.

4.1. Values-based Leadership - Inspired by the origins of Montessori education

Several interviewees drew on Dr Maria Montessori's work with underserved families as an inspiration for their own work. For three leaders they were initiating the first Montessori centre in their local area, breaking ground with new provision. They were acting as social entrepreneurs by responding to a lack of provision in an area but firmly focussed on the needs of an underserved community. Two leaders of a setting established the provision in the area they had lived all their lives and felt they wanted to 'give something back':

> *We went back to its origins and knew all children deserved access to Montessori education and we had this vision for our local area. We were bringing something totally new here but had a passionate commitment to its potential impact and had this unshakeable belief in Montessori for the community which we ourselves had grown up in…. (NL B2)*

Other leaders were also exhibiting values-based leadership:

> *So, I was the first Montessori in this area. This low-income area. That's my drive. My driving force basically was to setting up that wasn't already here. And I wasn't sure it would be accepted because Montessori, is quite different to, you know, mainstream nursery…. (NL D2)*

> *…and that's what Montessori was about, She took the streets. She supported families who had to work in the mines providing somewhere where the children could be safe and protected and taught, learned how to live and play independently, taught how to clean up after themselves, self-care how to care for their environment. (NL D2)*

Leaders cited Dr Montessori's original setting, the *Casa dei Bambini[4]*, San Lorenzo, Rome as an inspiration for their work:

> *And then in 2012, xxx, who is the former owner, literally thought: 'Let's go back to Montessori's roots.' And that's when we set up in a disadvantaged area…What's Montessori about? So it's sort of like, you know, she was there for children with additional needs and*

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[4] Casa dei Bambini (or Children's House) was the name of Montessori's first nursery established in Rome in 1907 See: https://montessori-ami.org/news/day-first-casa-dei-bambini

everything working with all families from all backgrounds and so we set up a CIC[5] company (NLC1)

Yes, we took inspiration from her work in an underserved area – it was a motivating factor to create something where nothing existed (NLB1)

Leaders also spoke explicitly about their advocacy work, and as with many other early educators (see [Mevawalla and Archer 2022](#)) saw advocacy as an intrinsic element of their work:

And then I became this kind of crusader of Montessori or this advocate. (NL A2)

I have a passion for Montessori….her great…. I call it her great work. It is her great work, and we need to continue it. Why do we need to continue it? Because of her vision. Her vision is to change the future to enhance our future through our young generation today (NL D2)

The children push me to want more for them to, to fight for them because I feel like I am an advocate for the children (N LA1)

The importance of equity of access to Montessori education was a key element of their values-led leadership:

It was, you know, again it was sort of like catering for every family. It wasn't just for just specific families. It was for every family, regardless of any needs they have. (NL C1)

Giving everyone the opportunity to access all areas and if that means their children come to a Montessori nursery where they didn't have the opportunity, if we were in an affluent area, then I want to make sure that every child gets that opportunity (NL C1)

What is evident from these data is the drive by leaders to enable equitable access for all children to Montessori education. Despite contemporary policy challenges, the fiscal environment and socio-economic conditions, these leaders, inspired by Dr Montessori's early work, developed Montessori provision in areas where none had previously existed. Their values-based leadership is illustrated in both their creation of new provision and a sense of service to their community. Notably, these community-based nurseries combined both charitable and private provision. Where privately owned, the values-based leadership appeared to drive decisions rather than income or profit oriented decision making.

Despite challenges over funding for 'free entitlement places' (see 4.2) it appeared that strategic and operational decisions were informed by this values-based leadership and a commitment to equity wherever possible. Reflections on equity of access to Montessori provision are also reflected under the theme of social responsibility and social justice below.

4.2 Responsibility - Driven by a sense of equity and social justice

Inclusive pedagogy

When asked about the community they served leaders said:

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[5] A Community Interest Company (CIC) is a limited company, with special additional features, created for the use of people who want to conduct a business or other activity for community benefit, and not purely for private advantage.

We're smack in the middle of xxx city, and we have children from all traditions and all backgrounds, which is really beautiful because and also economic backgrounds, you know, I've got when I first opened xxx, I used to have children who were chauffeured in here, you know, coz I was first Montessori nursery…. And slowly it became more and more children from the local community (NL D1)

We're doing something really right here. When we see the social mix of children from all backgrounds – that's really something…(NL C1)

We have such a diverse group of children and families using us. Families from the local estate use their funded hours with us, and other parents also travel miles for full time paid-for places. As a result, children from all kinds of income backgrounds can access our provision which we think is a positive thing for everyone (NL B2)

The nature of part time funded places (some universal and some by income criteria) makes for a highly complex systems of eligibility and entitlements to varying hours of ECEC at different ages. Nonetheless, the leaders interviewed all navigated this complexity to maximise children's access to funded hours, whilst attempting to cap fees on paid for hours wherever possible. Unlike the school system of open access (admission by catchment area) these leaders used their ingenuity to work within a system to enable maximum participation and inclusion by families regardless of income, with reconciling the financial sustainability of their setting.

Children with SEND

Work with children with SEND was a core element of the inclusive pedagogy of the Montessori settings in the study. This was articulated by leaders as 'a given', a non-negotiable right and entitlement for all children to be included in the life of the setting. Three of the nurseries had offered places for these children with SEND when other centres had turned them away.

One leader spoke of working with three children and their families with complex medical needs in the nursery. Staff had undertaken training led by medical professionals to support the needs of a child including one child with a nasogastric (NG) tube and another using an oxygen supply. This work necessarily included close supervision of the child on a 1:1 basis and extensive liaison work with a multi-disciplinary team of health professionals.

One centre appeared to go to extraordinary lengths in completing paperwork for applying for Education Health Care Plans (EHCP)[6]. This onerous process took many hours of the leaders work and resulted in some additional funding from the local authority to provide additional 1:1 staffing support for an individual child. The leader described her tenacity, in conjunction with the child's parents, in navigating a complex system:

'I see this work as advocacy, it's the child's birth right to have access to early childhood provision which is financially supported for their needs' (NL B2)

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[6] An EHC plan is a legally binding document outlining a child or teenager's special educational, health, and social care needs. The document has to list all of the child's special educational needs, provision to meet each of the needs and that provision has to be specific, detailed, and quantified. EHC plans are for those children (0-16) or young people (16-19) or adults (19-25) with special educational needs who require support beyond that which an educational setting can provide at SEN support. A child who has educational needs may also have additional health and social care needs and those can be included in the plan so long as they relate to education. (Ref: https://educationadvocacy.co.uk/what-is-a-ehcp/)

As a result, the leader was lauded by the local authority not only for her commitment to inclusion, but for the quality of support she and the team offered to the child and family in navigating the complexity of the funding and support system.

> 'One of the other big obstacles about the minute is children with SEN not getting the support that we need for that' (NL D1)

Often the cost implications of additional staffing to support children were borne by the nursery:

> 'I've got two children with additional leads in preschool room. So, with another 22 children on a ratio of 1 to 8. So, I'm actually now having to put an additional member of staff in that room out of sort of our pocket just to be able to support the staff with those children because of the needs that they have…so it's out of our pockets basically' (NL D1)

For some children considered to have 'low level' needs or being 'at risk of delay' there appeared to be even less support:

> 'He gets absolutely no support and other than from us and both of these children are due to start school in September as well. So, we're just trying our best…' (NL D1)

> I think we've had quite a few situations where additional needs children have been in another setting and then have kind of heard that we've done good things with children with additional needs in the past and have moved towards us…. It works so well with children, with additional needs. It is absolutely set up for children with SEND (NL E2)

Whilst such work is a feature of many early childhood education and care settings, this is often underfunded and unrecognised labour (see 4.3). Nonetheless, several leaders interviewed highlighted circumstances where children with SEND who attended their setting had either been poorly supported or indeed denied a place at other settings. Inclusive pedagogy and a respect for the 'unique child' appeared to be enacted in practice within these Montessori settings.

Funded hours – affordable fees

Against the backdrop of low funding, all leaders interviewed explained the challenges of reconciling an inclusive and affordable service with systemic underfunding for early childhood education and care. The ECEC system of central government funded hours has resulted in a system whereby ECEC providers, including Montessori settings are struggling to remain sustainable (EYA 2022). For the case study nurseries this was certainly the case. Nonetheless, whilst working in low-income areas, where families often had reduced abilities to pay fees for additional hours, the settings were working hard to retain fees at an affordable level.

> it's a hard one because I'm all for the funded hours but financially they don't support us with the hourly rate, it is not enough in this area. I know in Knightsbridge and in places like that they receive £8.00 an hour here its £5.00 an hour so you know it seems weird that it should be the other way around you know because this is where it is needed more. (NL D2)

> that's been a huge change in the dynamics of the nursery, which is wonderful because we're able to take children who can't afford a Montessori setting, you know, although we have to make, we have to. I have to, as a business owner, have to accept the shortfall on that one, which is hard because it the, the £5 an hour doesn't cover the overheads. So, you have to try and find it. (NL B2)

One nursery retained several places which were totally free of charge (without voluntary contributions or paid-for hours) meaning parents in receipt of Universal Credit or on low incomes could access these places for children without stigma.

> *I give 50 percent [of places funded], 50%. So, if all my funded places are filled by then, I say the parents: 'I'm sorry', but 99% of the time, somebody will come back, and I'll go 'OK. OK'. Because you just can't say 'no' to people. And they came yesterday, and I only have private [paid for] places remaining, and he goes. 'I can't afford it'. I said 'OK. You can have the place. You know it's fine because I want your child to be here. I know your child would benefit'. So, in that sense we we're trying to do the best we can but its underfunded NL D2)*

However, one leader acknowledged that low fees for parents resulted in low wages for the workforce highlighting the systems issue with the current funding regime.

> *The Save our Nurseries campaign. That was called to try to save nurseries from, you know, losing through the nursery grant because we want children to gain from us. And it's a bitter one, this one because if they only gave an extra pound an hour it would make a massive difference to the living standards teachers have because the teachers are the, you know, nursery teachers are the most poorly paid. (NL D2)*

Two other leaders highlighted the financial precarity not only of their setting but of the wider ECEC system and were concerned about the future of local provision.

Interestingly, all nurseries discussed the socio-economic 'mix' of families using the centres. Despite their location in relatively socio-economically disadvantaged areas, the centres catered for families across the income spectrum. The impact of early childhood education (including Montessori education) across a group of children from a mix of socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds is underexplored. Further research is needed to better understand the impact of the SES mix on children's outcomes.

4.3 Connectedness - Unrecognised labour: supporting the family and the child

A key theme, evident from interviews, was the sense of each setting being rooted in and connected to their local community.

> *I think it does boil down to the leadership because everyone used to say, 'xx you're just running a charity, you're not trying to make money' and I can understand that. I prefer not that it's charity, but it's just that care she cares for the children, she cares for the parents.*
>
> *This setting is literally about a whole community. So that's what I like. (NL A1)*
>
> *I think our work goes beyond a bit of fundraising, visiting local projects etc, we are truly rooted in our community. We have a 'drop-in' room for parents where they can come and talk, meet others and be connected, find some support and solidarity…. (NL B2)*
>
> *If they need counselling, if they need help to fill out forms and stuff like I'm really there for that…But then that's not the case everywhere - I just know that because I've worked around the area and nobody no one else really offers that safe haven for families (NL A1)*
>
> *we're community based, so we sort of help with the Food bank that's in one of our settings and literally it's sort of like a basket - take what you need, especially with the cost of living. (NL C1)*

Rootedness

From data analysed, Montessori education reflects the dynamic of a global pedagogy rooted in a local context. Leaders spoke about what Montessori meant in their community as they developed culturally responsive education:

> *So, it's all about that community connection. See the benefits of having a Montessori here is it extends into the community. We're doing Montessori in a (location) way… (NL D2)*

> *I get loads of Somalian tea and food, and everything brought to me by families because that's their way of honouring someone who's giving them something, you know seeing their children develop and recognising our role in that (NL D2)*

> *We had a lot of work to do when we first opened to debunk some myths, but several years on I feel there is a sense of community pride in what we offer, celebrating with us…(NLB2)*

> *It's got a very strong reputation within the community even on like social media and stuff. It's constantly being recommended by people. So, it kind of stands strong in the community. We've got really good links with the local schools. (NL E1)*

Family support

Above the offer of Montessori early education and care, a whole range of informal professional support appears to be offered to children and families. One leader explained the extensive work she had undertaken supporting mothers who had experienced domestic violence. This support included counselling (for which she was trained), emotional support and signposting for legal support in leaving an abusive relationship. In addition, the leader used the centres funds to offer small scale financial support to those families who were struggling, depositing funds in their bank accounts.

> *And it's like they find it like a home, a refuge. That's the word. So, it's a very loving, a loving community. The parents loving their if they need help from me like we just had one family who lost their father recently. He's our youngest is about 3. And like we all the teachers pulled together to help the mom. So, like I kept them while the funeral was going on. (NL A1)*

> *I find that we have been offering lots of informal family support, particularly since COVID – issues of parental mental health, job insecurity, difficulties with relationships…. (NL B2)*

> *When a family are in difficulty, they on my phone is never closed and it should be closed. I know, I know it should close it. I close it when I go to bed at night and there'll be messages, voice messages, cause WhatsApp now has opened a big way for people to communicate, and parents who are struggling because they can't get their child to bed, or they can't do this so they can't do that. And I can't leave them alone because they haven't got a mother here, a grandmother here (NL D2)*

One setting leader described supporting parents during relationship breakdown and another cited family debt and alcohol problems as recent issues for parents using the nursery. This remains publicly unacknowledged emotional, and intellectual labour given freely beyond what is funded, charged for, regulated for, or expected. Such family support and community development work (previously supported through Sure Start and children's centres in some communities) appears to be a key feature of the work of these Montessori leaders.

It is evident that in these settings, as possibly in many others, that much 'informal' family support is happening. What was also evident was that this work, rooted in an ethic of care, was also time consuming and emotionally demanding. This work with parents does not feature on websites, prospectuses or indeed in funding agreements for Montessori education, but was deemed intrinsic to community building around the Montessori nursery.

> *It's like a home and she said we're treated like it's personal. It's a personal, it's a personal education for each of us as parents and for the children. So, I'm going to miss that no matter where my children go, I'm not gonna get that in the system. We're very unique in how we, you know, encourage parents to be part of the nursery I do a lot of counselling… (NL D2)*

4.4 Learning for Life - Rewriting what school readiness means

The notion of 'school readiness' has particular connotation in an Anglophone context. School readiness is a contested term. In government policy text, the term is defined as:

> 'a measure of how prepared a child is to succeed in school cognitively, socially and emotionally. The good level of development (GLD) is used to assess school readiness. Children are defined as having reached a GLD at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage if they achieved at least the expected level in the early learning goals in the prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language) and in the specific areas of mathematics and literacy.' (Public Health England 2015)

However, there is a common understanding amongst educators that 'school readiness' refers to on-entry to Reception Year (YR) – the first year of formal schooling and the academic year in which a child becomes 5 years of age.

For participating Montessori leaders, this notion was challenged. Rather, there was focus in interviews on Montessori education as an 'aid to life'.

> *I've got a very different way of looking at school readiness (NL D2)*

> *When you go to parties, when you have family over, what does he do? He sets the table, she said. He cleans up afterwards. I said this is the readiness. We're looking at life readiness, OK, this child is ready for life. Montessori is an education for life, not for tests and not for school. (NL D2)*

> *It's kind of following the child and not….just putting that pressure on them (NL A1)*

> *I'm not buying the definition of school readiness. Children with us are nurtured in their confidence, concentration, persistence, but also learning to live in community. We like the characteristics of effective learning as they chime with Montessori. Bur fundamentally, Montessori education is about holistic development not compartmentalised areas of learning. (NL B1)*

> *We focus on the foundations. Rather than racing to literacy and numeracy. And. Yeah, that's interesting. I think it's quite a big difference in Montessori settings, isn't it good?! (NL A1)*

Nurturing Independence and Agency

Developing an environment and pedagogy with children's independence as a priority was at the core of all five leaders' work. As a key feature of a Montessori environment and education, this is not surprising.

> *This area has a really high population of child obesity and children not being physically ready for school, so having no core strength, being able to carry the trays at dinner time and that's what's being looked at much more in xxx – physical development and co-ordination rather than 'can they write the name' 'can they do like number one sign' and that's something that the Montessori curriculum and we've really set them up for. (NLE1)*

> *When xxx was first set up, xxx, who was the former director, she literally said she was worried when they went to school because they weren't at nursery that long. You know, they haven't got much of the Montessori 'into them' and that, but the one thing the reception teacher said she could tell, which one, which children are gone to Montessori setting compared to those that hadn't. They were more independent. (NLC1)*

The importance of holistic development

These leaders reconceptualised the notion of 'school readiness' in Montessori terms as the holistic development of the child. This was understood as a broader, richer definition beyond 'areas of learning' in the EYFS and focussing on children's wider dispositions.

> *Like, explore, experiment and then it clicks and then like we've got one little girl who should have been in Reception right now and she stayed. And it wasn't until say October that her sensitive period just clicked and now she has letter sounds and starting to read. But had she left, she wouldn't have had that opportunity just to find herself in the areas. The elements of literacy or numeracy. So grateful that mum had the patience to keep her here. (NL A1)*

This vignette illustrates how this nursery 'followed the child' as opposed to an externally imposed timetable and milestones. The decision was supported by the parent who had chosen for the child to remain in the Montessori nursery beyond the date when she would conventionally have transitioned to a mainstream Reception class in school.

> *This idea of child agency is so key. We need children to have the confidence and willingness to have a go and make choices and learn from their own actions and also mistakes. In a Montessori setting the power is not with the adult, its with the child….. we need to talk about life readiness not school readiness. (NL B2)*

5. Implications and Conclusions

Based on analysis of these data, the following implications are proposed with recommendations for possible actions and further study.

Values-based leadership

The leaders interviewed illustrated their values-based and social-justice oriented leadership. This was noticeably informed by their belief in the Montessori principles. However, there was also a sense of isolation, not only in the locality but a sense of disconnection within the wider Montessori world. Leaders had found online platforms supportive to connect with each other. However, the

absence (in many locations) of local authority facilitated networks and reduced face to face networking opportunities post COVID were highlighted. Leaders felt that in enacting a Montessori pedagogy they would value further opportunities to connect and share experiences. Research has highlighted the particular challenges for these Montessori leaders working in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and their needs to meet with other leaders for solidarity and mutual support.

Recommendation: The establishment of face-to-face networking opportunities to consider leadership issues and challenges to offer support for Montessori leaders.

Driven by a sense of equity and social justice

It was evident from interview data that Montessori leaders within these communities were motivated by a sense of social justice. Commitment to equity of access, however possible, and the provision of an inclusive pedagogy were prominent.

Financial precarity was a feature of several of the nurseries, whose leaders struggled to reconcile underfunding with balancing the books. Acknowledging that this was a systemic issue, these leaders were creative and resourceful in enabling access to all whilst remaining sustainable. Nonetheless, as a result reduced levels of income and high outgoings meant that they felt unable to remunerate their colleagues at a level they deserved.

Despite their location in relatively socio-economically disadvantaged areas, the centres catered for families across the income spectrum. The impact of early childhood education (including Montessori education) across a group of children from a mix of socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds is underexplored.

Recommendation: Further research is undertaken to better understand the nature and impact of 'social mixing' of children from differing socio-economic backgrounds on the outcomes of all children in a group.

Supporting the family and the child

It is evident, from the study, that these leaders (as is possibly the case with many ECEC leaders), offer substantial advice, guidance, counselling and practical support beyond the offer of Montessori early education and care.

The leaders interviewed articulated the support they offered for children with SEND and their parents. They also spoke of the challenges of navigating a complex and underfunded system. They also felt that there was a lack of awareness of the importance of this work and the impact it has. More detailed (anonymous and consent supported) case studies of individual child and family support to highlight children's development and the specific support of a Montessori environment and educators would be valuable.

Ongoing lobbying by settings and Montessori representative bodies in conjunction with SEND charities for additional support is recommended.

Recommendation: The development of more detailed case studies would convey the impact of Montessori education for children with SEND.

Recommendation: Ongoing lobbying by settings at a local level (perhaps with central guidance) and Montessori representative bodies in conjunction with SEND charities for additional financial resources from central government.

School/Life readiness

Several of the leaders interviewed rejected conventional definitions of 'school readiness'. In keeping with the Montessori approach, a more expansive understanding of the role of early education was articulated. Leaders spoke of 'life readiness' and 'learning for life' refusing the common understanding of the 'good level of development' (GLD). Wider discussions about children's holistic development, the importance of independence and agency and richer understandings based on children's rights, respect and 'following the child' featured in interviews.

Given that the school readiness discourse now pervades the policy and practice landscape, it seems timely to reinvigorate discussion about the limitations of accepted definitions and consider the concept through a Montessori lens. The creation of opportunities to debate and better understand Montessori perspectives of 'readiness' would support a clarity of alternative definitions or understandings to position Montessori pedagogy in relation to this concept.

Recommendation: Opportunities are developed to further explore and debate the notion of 'school readiness' from a Montessori perspective.

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Appendix 1 Interview Topic Guide

Interview Topic Guide

1. Can you tell me a little about your Montessori career 'journey'? What drew you to Montessori education?

2. Please tell me about this nursery, its history, operating hours, staffing arrangements, curriculum

3. Can you tell me some of the features of the families and communities you serve? Income? Ethnicity?

4. What hours do children attend the nursery? Are these funded or paid for hours?

5. What do you think parents/carers value about the Montessori setting that their children attend?

6. From your perspective, what are parents' perceptions of children's development during their time in the Montessori setting?

7. What were the motivations of setting owners/leaders for establishing Montessori provision in a diverse or socially mixed area? Or for educators, what was your motivation for working in this particular setting?

8. What do you think are the benefits and challenges for setting leaders of offering Montessori education in a socio-economically disadvantaged or diverse area?

9. What are the strengths of the setting in terms of the Montessori approach?

10. What are the current challenges for you in operating the nursery? What keeps you going? What motivates you?

11. What values are important to you and your setting?