



# Researching the work of Montessori nurseries in underserved areas of England

## A summary

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# INTRODUCTION

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 operate in diverse and more socio-economically disadvantaged areas, but their work is not well understood. It is timely and important to consider the work of Montessorians in low-income communities and to understand perceptions of this educational approach by key stakeholders.

This summary reports on small scale, exploratory research with nine Montessori leaders. Key themes analysed from interviews with these leaders reflect the nature and impact of their work in underserved communities.

The findings are arranged thematically:

- Values-based leadership
- Commitment to equity and social justice
- Being rooted in local communities
- Rewriting school readiness

The conclusion highlights implications and recommendations.

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Thank you to the participants who took time out of their busy working lives to respond thoughtfully to the interview questions. Your time, energy, and candour is greatly appreciated.



# BACKGROUND

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 largely run by private and voluntary providers, usually as single site, or small group operations.

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](#)).

This research was initiated to better understand the context, motivations and daily work of leaders in these settings.

## Research Questions

- What were the motivations of setting leaders for establishing and leading Montessori provision in an underserved area?
- What are the benefits and challenges to children, families and setting leaders of offering Montessori education in an underserved area?

Interviews with nine Montessori nursery leaders and managers were arranged via MS Teams. Data from interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed.



# LEADERS & MONTESSORI NURSERIES

Montessori nurseries known to be operating in under-served areas were identified. Their postcodes were reviewed with the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) postcode checker to identify the relative deprivation of their neighbourhood (see below). Senior staff of eight nurseries were approached. Nine leaders across five nurseries consented to participate.

Participating settings ranged in size and governance arrangements (see below). All had a significant number of Montessori qualified staff members and were active members of the UK Montessori community.

Leaders of these nurseries included owners, registered managers and senior members of teams.

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 yrs	Good
Nursery B	40% most deprived closely bordering 10% most deprived neighbourhoods	Single site nursery Private limited Company	23 yrs	Outstanding
Nursery C	40% most disadvantaged neighbourhood	Small nursery group Community Interest Company	14 yrs	Good
Nursery D	40% most disadvantaged area neighbouring more advantaged areas.	Single site nursery Private limited Company	7 yrs	Outstanding
Nursery E	40% most disadvantaged neighbourhood bordering 10% most deprived neighbourhood	Small nursery group Private limited Company	20 yrs	Outstanding

# VALUES BASED LEADERSHIP

**Interviewees drew on Dr Maria Montessori's work with underserved families as an inspiration for their own work.** Several leaders cited Montessori's initial work in a low income area of Rome in 1907 as a touchstone for their work.

Three leaders had initiated 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 in all their lives and felt they wanted to 'give something back'

*We went back to the origins of Montessori. We believe all children deserve access to this education and we had this vision for our local area. We were bringing something totally new here but we had this unshakeable belief in Montessori for the community which we ourselves had grown up in....*

*I have a passion for Montessori....her great work, and we need to continue it. Why do we need to continue it? Because of her vision. Her vision was to change the future to enhance our future through our young generation today*

**The leaders interviewed illustrated their values-based and social-justice oriented leadership. This was informed by their belief in Montessori principles.**

Where privately owned, strategic and operational decisions for the nursery appeared to be driven by quality of experiences for children and staff wellbeing rather than on income or profit.

**Leaders spoke explicitly about their advocacy work in terms of advocating for children on a local level and more broadly for Montessori education nationally.**

However, there was also a sense of isolation articulated by leaders, not only in the locality but a sense of disconnection within the wider Montessori world. Since the COVID pandemic, leaders had found multiple opportunities to connect online 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 expressed how, in enacting a Montessori pedagogy, they would value further opportunities to connect and share experiences.**

# COMMITMENT TO EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

**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.** Nonetheless, whilst working in low-income areas, where families had reduced abilities to pay fees for additional hours, the settings were working hard to retain fees at an affordable level. However, one leader acknowledged that affordable fees for parents resulted in low wages for the workforce highlighting the implications of the current funding regime.

**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.

**Work with children with SEND was a core element of the inclusive pedagogy of the Montessori settings.** 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 children with SEND when other centres had turned them away.



*I see this work as advocacy. It's every child's birth right to have access to early childhood provision which is financially supported to meet their needs*

# ROOTED IN COMMUNITIES

**A key theme, from interviews, was the sense of each Montessori nursery being rooted in and deeply connected to their local community.** Whilst Montessori education reflects the dynamic of a global pedagogy, leaders spoke about what Montessori meant in their community as they a developed culturally responsive version of this approach to education. The leaders of nurseries in this study served very different communities (e.g. ethnically diverse, urban community in one, white, rural low income community another).

Notably all leaders appeared to be well known community champions and local leaders in various capacities.

Many additional services and initiatives had been develop around the nurseries creating a hub in response to community needs. **Over and above Montessori education the participants had initiated a food bank, family learning workshops, parenting advice, links with a women's refuge and trained counselling support.**

*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....*

*...noone else really offers that safe haven for families*

It is clear that in these Montessori settings, as is likely in many other ECEC centres, that much 'informal' family support is happening. It was also evident that this work, rooted in an ethic of care, was also time consuming and emotionally demanding. **This work remains publicly unacknowledged emotional, and intellectual labour given freely beyond what is funded, regulated for or expected.** This support for families does not feature on websites or in prospectuses or indeed in funding agreements for Montessori education, but was deemed by leaders to be intrinsic to community building around the Montessori nursery.



# REWRITING SCHOOL READINESS

**Montessori leaders challenged conventional notions of 'school readiness'.** They rejected over emphasis on literacy and numeracy refusing the common understanding of the 'good level of development' (GLD).

These leaders were rewriting 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 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and focussing on children's wider learning dispositions.

Leaders spoke of Montessori education in terms of 'life readiness' and 'learning for life'. 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. **Developing an environment and pedagogy with children's independence as a priority was at the core of the work of all these leaders.**

*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.... Montessori education is about holistic development not compartmentalised areas of learning.*



# CONCLUSION

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

**These centres 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.

**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. Further case studies to better understand the extent of this work would support lobbying for additional resources.

**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.

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<https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/research/the-international-montessori-institute/>