

Breaking the Chains: Montessori and the Fight for Educational Justice

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Abstract

Too often, children with disabilities enter school already bound by labels, restrictive placements, and rigid systems—chains that limit their potential before they even have a chance to learn. This literature review examines whether Montessori education provides a genuinely inclusive and developmentally responsive approach for children with disabilities. Montessori's emphasis on autonomy, sensory-rich materials, and purposeful activity positions it as a promising framework for breaking the chains of restrictive labels and educational barriers, supporting cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. Evidence across diverse learner populations indicates gains in literacy, executive functioning, motor skills, and engagement when Montessori principles are implemented with fidelity. At the same time, persistent challenges—particularly related to teacher preparation, confidence, and limited specialized training—continue to tether inclusion to inconsistent practice, restricting the effectiveness of Montessori's promise. Research has largely focused on student outcomes, with far less attention to how teachers understand, interpret, and enact inclusion in their daily work. This review synthesizes developmental, philosophical, and empirical studies to clarify both Montessori's potential and its practical constraints. Findings highlight the need for deeper qualitative insight into teacher experiences, stronger professional learning systems, and clearer supports to ensure that Montessori environments unshackle diverse learners from educational limitations imposed by traditional

systems. Taken together, the literature has underscored that Montessori education can offer an inclusive alternative to traditional models, but its success depends on addressing gaps in implementation and expanding research that connects foundational principles with classroom realities.

Keywords: Montessori education; inclusion; teacher preparation; developmental practice; diverse learners; implementation fidelity

Imagine going through an entire school experience—from preschool through high school—never included in the cafeteria, gym, or library. Before anyone has a chance to truly know the student, the school assigns a formal disability label. That label dictates the so-called “services” the child receives—often isolating the student in a resource room or structured classroom—limiting opportunities to participate fully in school life. Parents often later describe this diagnosis process as rushed, procedural, and shaped more by institutional requirements than by a genuine understanding of the child, influencing how the child’s needs are interpreted from the start.

What if those early conclusions were incomplete—or even wrong—and the label placed on the student robbed them not just of the opportunities, but of one’s sense of self, joy, and place in the world? The family is handed an “individualized” plan that many parents see as anything but individualized—instead standardized, designed to check legal boxes rather than meet the child’s needs (DeMatthews & Parker, 2025, p. 671). The parents and child are told that the student cannot be in the general educational classroom, instead placing the child somewhere stark, plain, and unwelcoming—where friendships, choice, and agency are stifled. The student’s days become defined by compliance, token rewards, and the limits imagined for them by others.

But education can be different. Maria Montessori recognized that children develop

according to natural laws, and that their full potential unfolds when environments provide freedom, appropriate materials, and opportunities for self-construction (as cited in Ramani, 2020). Every child deserves an environment that provides the materials and conditions to support their growth, allowing them to exercise choice, and revealing their innate capabilities rather than one that imposes ceilings on development. Montessori classrooms, when implemented with fidelity, are spaces where children are seen for whom they are—their preferences, personalities, and abilities—and are given real tools to contribute, to work, to exercise agency as full human beings (Barrameda, 2020).

This review examines the extent to which Montessori education provides a truly inclusive and developmentally responsive alternative for children with disabilities, or whether its inclusive promise remains unrealized in practice. By analyzing how Montessori’s practices relate to cognitive, social-emotional, and holistic development for children with disabilities—and exposing the barriers, gaps, and inconsistencies that block full inclusion—this review clarifies Montessori’s potential and highlights implementation challenges and areas where further research is needed to fully realize its inclusive promise. It also highlights how evidence-based principles can inform equitable, inclusive classroom practices, break chains, dismantle systemic barriers, and challenge the injustice that conventional schools have long enforced on children silenced by rigid labels (Di Blasi et al., 2025; Kersna et al., 2025; Montessori, 1967b).

Literature Review

Montessori Education: A Radical Vision for All Children

Many children experience early labeling and segregation that shackle their opportunities long before their abilities can fully emerge (Dubovoy, 2020; Montessori, 1967b; Vaz, 2020). Traditional educational structures often emphasize deficits, rely on restrictive placements, and

prioritize compliance over genuine learning and development (Joosten, 2020b). These systemic barriers can stifle potential and obscure children's strengths, particularly for those with disabilities (Montessori, 2012; Vaz, 2020).

Montessori education offers a radically different vision. Montessori's work was not primarily about conventional education in the sense of teaching as a direct transmission of knowledge (as cited in Ramani, 2022). Rather, her studies emphasized supporting the full emergence of every child's potential. This means creating conditions where children can actively engage with their environment, explore, and exercise agency—because learning occurs naturally through their interaction with the world, not through imposed instruction (Barrameda, 2020; Montessori, 1979). In many ways, contemporary university studies of Montessori's methods may be better situated within human development programs rather than traditional education courses, which often equate teaching with learning (Ramani, 2022).

Rooted in careful observation, respect for natural development, and child-centered pedagogy, Montessori education provides an environment where children, including those with disabilities, can explore, make choices, and develop at their own pace (Vaz, 2020). In Montessori classrooms, children exercise autonomy, refine fine motor skills, develop self-regulation, and engage in purposeful activity—all within a prepared environment designed to meet diverse needs (Lillard, 2017). Every material and activity support the formation of the whole child, ensuring the conditions of freedom necessary for self-construction as an aid to life (Ramani, 2020).

To examine how Montessori education serves all children, including those with disabilities, this literature review is organized around four key areas:

- Historical and philosophical roots of Montessori's inclusive foundations,
- Montessori principles as an inclusive educational framework,

- Empirical evidence on outcomes for diverse learners, and
- Gaps, barriers, and current challenges in Montessori inclusion.

Collectively, these areas outline Montessori's inclusive foundations, reveal evidence of its transformative potential and expose the structural challenges that must be dismantled to make its promise fully accessible to all children (AuCoin & Berger, 2024; Long et al., 2022; Montessori, 2012).

Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Montessori and Inclusion

Maria Montessori's (1967b) approach to education emerged directly from her medical and psychiatric training, which shaped her reliance on systematic observation and scientific pedagogy. As a physician working in psychiatric settings, she observed institutionalized children who were living in impoverished and highly restricted environments (Lillard, 2017; Montessori, 1967b). Through close, clinical observation, Montessori (1966) noted that when these children were provided meaningful sensory and motor activity, their once-restlessness, wandering movements began to organize into purposeful action as their hands and bodies became guided by a mind newly eager to explore and understand the world and a directed search for knowledge replaced their "aimless curiosity" (p. 156). Casas-Cortes (2020) highlighted that one of Montessori's key contributions, beyond her concrete pedagogical development, was to make children both the object of scientific research and a central concern of social policy, an approach grounded in systematic observation rather than speculative assumptions.

Montessori's work built directly on the earlier efforts of Jean-Marc Itard and Édouard Séguin. Itard's work, *Victor de l'Aveyron*, focused on developing the child's senses (Itard, 2009), demonstrating the importance of careful sensory engagement in fostering learning. Séguin's (1866) experimental methods emphasized motor training, individualized instruction, and the idea

that progress follows careful observation. Montessori credited Séguin as a major influence, adopting his belief that education must awaken the child's latent capacities rather than impose external form (Montessori, 1967b).

These insights informed Montessori's early development of educational materials that isolate specific sensory concepts and allow for repeated, purposeful practice, supported by built-in controls of error (Barrameda, 2020; Montessori, 1967b). She paired these materials with an environment designed to free the child from imposed limit, fostering autonomous growth rather than adult-driven control (Joosten, 2020a, 2020b). Her observations led her to conclude that independence, spontaneous concentration, and inner discipline emerge naturally when children engage in purposeful activity under conditions of freedom (Montessori, 1967a). She described this progression "from inertia to work" as the natural path through which children construct themselves (Montessori, 1967a, p. 92).

These early experiences formed the basis of Montessori's child-centered philosophy. She maintained that all children possess the potential for development when provided with conditions that allow them to actively shape their own growth and cultivate their innate capacities (as cited in Joosten, 2020a, 2020b) and believed that the same principles that supported children with disabilities could also nurture typically developing children (Montessori, 1967b). When Montessori later opened the *Casa dei Bambini*, a program serving 3- to 6-year-old children in impoverished neighborhoods, particularly in San Lorenzo, Rome, Italy, as an early childhood education and day-care setting, she found that the same materials and methods developed in clinical settings enabled children to engage joyfully with their activities and discover their own capacities (as cited in Krumins-Grazzini, 2020). Observing the children's spontaneous concentration, happiness, and eagerness to work, Montessori (1966) realized that these principles

were not just remedial for children with disabilities but revolutionary for all children, leading her to dedicate her life to understanding and supporting the child's development.

Montessori (1966) argued that pedagogy cannot be abstract, self-referential, or detached from reality, but must fight for the concrete, the lived experience, and the agency of each child. She maintained that education must follow the methods of the sciences—rooted in observation, open to experimentation, verifiable, and adaptable—so that teaching can respond effectively to individual and social needs. By insisting that educational environments be intentionally prepared to support each child's development while maintaining the social dimension of learning, Montessori helped establish the foundations for later inclusive and integrative educational models (Curatola, 2016).

Montessori Principles as an Inclusive Educational Framework

Montessori education emphasizes the child as the active agent in learning, with a philosophy grounded in respect for individual development, autonomy, and purposeful engagement (Joosten, 2016; Montessori, 1967a; Vaz, 2020). As Baker (2020) noted, all children possess inherent human rights from birth that must be preserved, and education must honor these rights by supporting the child's growth into an adult who understands and participates in a society that safeguards these rights. This focus means that instructional decisions begin with the child's developmental needs rather than with predetermined expectations. Building on her early work and informed by her observations of children with special needs, Montessori developed an approach that emphasizes careful observation, respect for the child's independence, and the facilitation of confidence and perseverance (as cited in Vaz, 2020). Vaz (2020) highlighted that children with special needs often display remarkable courage and tenacity, reducing what appear as major disabilities into manageable challenges through determination and engagement with

their environment. The integration of children with special needs into Montessori classrooms benefits all students, supporting their development through practical life activities that engage thought, will, and action (Vaz, 2020).

A key principle of the method is independence and autonomy, which Montessori (1967a, 1967b) observed emerge when children are provided freedom within a carefully prepared environment. Through freely chosen, purposeful activity, children develop self-regulation, inner discipline, and concentration (Barrameda, 2020; Ramani, 2020; Tiryaki et al., 2021). These competencies support both cognitive and social-emotional growth for all learners (Tiryaki et al., 2021). These principles apply to all learners, including those with special needs, reflecting the universality of her approach (Lillard, 2017; Lillard et al., 2017; Montessori, 1967a).

The prepared environment is foundational to inclusion, structured intentionally to meet developmental and sensory needs rather than forcing children to conform to rigid expectations (Joosten, 2016; Leonard, 2020). This environment fosters autonomy, engagement, and meaningful relationships while supporting a sense of belonging for every child (Barrameda, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Features such as mixed-age groupings, individualized pacing, and hands-on materials allow for natural differentiation, aligning closely with modern inclusive education principles, including respect for neurodiversity and developmentally appropriate practice (Demangeon et al., 2023; Lillard et al., 2017; McKenzie & Zascavage, 2012).

Montessori pedagogy's focus on observation ensures that instruction is guided by the child's developmental needs, rather than assumptions based on disability labels (Krogh, 1982). Observation-driven teaching allows educators to adjust supports responsively and to recognize emerging strengths. Fidelity to these principles supports the emergence of each child's potential, fostering equity and inclusivity (AuCoin & Berger, 2024; Somma et al., 2024). Research also has

demonstrated that Montessori classrooms inherently support inclusion through multi-age groupings, individualized lessons, and peer-assisted learning, allowing children to learn from older and more experienced peers, while promoting engagement, social learning, and confidence (Danner, 2015).

However, successful implementation depends on teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and preparation, highlighting the importance of professional development tailored to inclusive practices within Montessori settings (Danner & Fowler, 2015; Somma et al., 2024). Taken together, these principles (i.e., autonomy, purposeful work, individualized learning, observation-driven teaching, multi-age classrooms, and peer-assisted learning) offer a strong foundation for inclusive education. When faithfully applied, these principles enable all children to access meaningful experiences aligned with their developmental needs. They also expand opportunities for learners who have historically been marginalized within traditional educational systems to realize their full developmental potential.

Empirical Evidence on Outcomes for Diverse Learners

Montessori education emphasizes a carefully prepared environment and specialized materials that isolate sensory concepts, allowing repeated, purposeful engagement, and natural control of error (Barrameda, 2020; Lillard, 2017; Montessori, 1967b; Vaz, 2020). These materials support children in building concepts through hands-on exploration rather than passive instruction, fostering independence, autonomy, and sustained attention (Montessori, 1967a; Vaz, 2020). By providing freedom within structured, developmentally appropriate conditions, Montessori classrooms enable children with disabilities to actively participate in their learning, while teachers tailor guidance according to each child's individual developmental needs.

Courtier et al. (2021) conducted a pre-registered, randomized controlled study examining disadvantaged preschoolers in a French public school assigned to either conventional or Montessori classrooms. The Montessori curriculum was adapted to the public-school context, with fewer materials, shorter work periods, and relatively limited Montessori teacher training. Cross-sectional analyses in kindergarten ($n = 176$; M age = 5–6) and longitudinal analyses over three years of preschool ($n = 70$; M age = 3–6) showed that the adapted Montessori curriculum produced outcomes comparable to the conventional curriculum in math, executive functions, and social skills. However, children in the Montessori classrooms significantly outperformed their peers on reading ($d = 0.68$), with performance comparable to advantaged children from an accredited Montessori preschool. Children also reported feeling as competent in reading as those in the private Montessori program, suggesting that Montessori methods can enhance early literacy and self-awareness among children facing socio-economic challenges.

This study has several methodological strengths, including its preregistered design, randomized assignment within the public preschool, and longitudinal follow-up over 3 years, which reduced analytic flexibility and potential biases (Courtier et al., 2021). Limitations included that assessors were not blind to group assignment, which could introduce testing bias, and the adapted Montessori curriculum had lower fidelity compared to high-fidelity Montessori programs, potentially limiting generalizability. Additionally, sample sizes were constrained by the number of children in the participating schools, and differences between public Montessori and private Montessori groups could reflect confounding variables such as parental involvement or socioeconomic status rather than curricular effects.

Kaya and Torun (2022) investigated the effects of Montessori education on children with

Down syndrome and autism, comparing 10 children receiving Montessori education with 10 children receiving traditional education using Eurofit test batteries for motor skills. They found statistically significant improvements in the plate tapping (fine motor) and standing long jump (gross motor) tests for the Montessori group ($p < 0.05$), whereas the control group showed improvement only in the sit-and-reach test. While this study provided preliminary evidence that Montessori materials can support motor development in children with neurodevelopmental disabilities, the small, all-male sample, limited reporting on intervention duration, and partial details about teacher training reduce generalizability and the strength of conclusions.

Similarly, Di Blasi et al. (2025) reviewed studies on children with intellectual disabilities and autism, finding evidence that Montessori-based interventions enhanced motor skills, visual perception, school readiness, and executive functions, with moderate to large effect sizes reported in several studies (e.g., Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006; Randolph et al., 2023). Effects on social skills and creativity were observed but smaller and less consistently reported, and variability in sample sizes, intervention duration, and fidelity reporting further limited the generalizability of these findings.

Afshan et al. (2024) conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT) examining the impact of Montessori Sensorial Training on 30 children with mild intellectual disabilities. Participants in the intervention group ($n = 15$) demonstrated significant improvements in cognitive abilities (i.e., classification, seriation, recognition, ordination, and visual and auditory discrimination) and enhanced communication and self-care skills compared to the waitlist control group ($n = 15$). This RCT design strengthens the methodological rigor of the study; however, the small sample size, focus on mild intellectual disabilities, and limited reporting on fidelity and practitioner training may constrain the generalizability of the results.

Despite these positive outcomes, limitations in the research should be noted. Kaya and Torun (2022) had a small, all-male sample, with limited reporting on intervention duration and practitioner training, which may limit generalizability. Di Blasi et al. (2025) noted small sample sizes, underrepresentation of females, variable intervention durations, and inconsistent reporting of methodological details such as teacher training, fidelity, and treatment goals. Cultural and school-system factors, as well as limited geographic distribution of studies, may have also affected generalizability. Furthermore, outcome measures varied across studies, limiting direct comparisons.

Nevertheless, the evidence indicated that, when properly implemented, Montessori education can promote engagement, autonomy, and meaningful learning for children with diverse abilities, supporting both cognitive and adaptive development in special education contexts. Vaz (2020) emphasized that children with special needs often showed remarkable courage, perseverance, and determination, and that adults should observe carefully and provide just enough support to foster independence and confidence. Consistent with Montessori's philosophy, this approach respects each child as an individual, aiming to help every learner reach their fullest potential through thoughtfully prepared environments and practical activities that integrate thought, will, and action (Joosten, 2013; Ramani, 2013; Vaz, 2020). Together with the findings of Courtier et al. (2021), Afshan et al. (2024), Di Blasi et al. (2025), and Kaya and Torun (2022) indicated that Montessori education—through its sensorially rich, hands-on, individualized, and structured approach—can enhance cognitive, social, motor, and adaptive skills across diverse learner populations, reducing early inequalities related to socio-economic background or developmental disabilities.

Gaps, Barriers, and Current Challenges in Montessori Inclusion

Despite strong theoretical and empirical support for Montessori education as an inclusive approach, significant gaps remain in understanding its implementation. Research has indicated persistent challenges related to teacher beliefs, confidence, and limited specialized training, which affect the enactment of inclusive practices (Long et al., 2022; Somma et al., 2024). Studies have largely focused on student outcomes, with limited attention to teachers' perspectives on how inclusion is operationalized daily (Shaw & Baker, 2024). Danner and Fowler (2015) found that American Montessori Society (AMS) trained teachers reported positive support for inclusion but had fewer professional development opportunities in special education compared to non-Montessori peers, and Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) trained teachers, whose programs adhere more strictly to Montessori principles, were not included in the study, highlighting a key gap.

Qualitative insight is limited, with few studies examining the lived experiences of Montessori teachers in inclusive classrooms (Doğru & Doğru, 2024; Somma et al., 2024). Existing research has emphasized the dynamic process of inclusion, requiring intentional adaptation of the environment, collaboration with specialists, and reflection on philosophy to meet diverse learner needs (AuCoin & Berger, 2024; McKenzie & Zascavage, 2012). Moreover, fidelity of Montessori implementation influences outcomes, yet variation in adherence to core principles remains underexplored (Demangeon et al., 2023; Lillard, 2017; Marshall, 2017; Murray et al., 2019).

Li (2025) offers further insight, examining Montessori education specifically for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In a systematic review of 15 studies, Li (2025) identified

Montessori as a sensory-focused, individualized, and play-based learning approach that aligns well with the developmental needs of children with ASD. She noted this approach is particularly effective for enhancing communication and social skills in these children. However, methodologically, the review was limited: only 15 of 1,740 screened articles met inclusion criteria. The studies included in the review were heterogeneous in design. Most were non-RCTs, and there was sparse data specific to children with ASD. The review also highlights geographic disparities, noting an underrepresentation of low- and middle-income countries. Li (2025) emphasized that there is a lack of culturally adapted empirical research in this area. Furthermore, the review relied on narrative synthesis rather than meta-analysis because of the variability in sample sizes, interventions, and outcome measures, which limited causal inferences.

Li (2025) also underscored the practical implications of her findings. She explained Montessori's low-arousal, self-paced, multisensory learning environment may be particularly suitable for children with ASD who experience sensory processing challenges and executive function differences. The review identified theoretical matches between Montessori principles and ASD learning profiles. However, Li (2025) emphasized that the empirical evidence supported Montessori as a targeted pedagogy is weak. The studies had small sample sizes, lacked control groups, and there were scarce longitudinal or RCT data. This situation pointed to the need for more rigorous, culturally sensitive, and geographically diverse studies to establish Montessori's effectiveness as an intervention for children with ASD.

In addition, Lillard (2019) highlighted that Montessori education remains highly effective across multiple developmental domains, including social, emotional, and academic outcomes, due in part to its alignment with educational psychology and its holistic approach to independence and self-determination. They underscored that challenges in implementation often

arise from Montessori's incommensurability with conventional schooling culture, which can result in poor fidelity even when the basic elements are supported by research. Lillard (2019) emphasized that Montessori's effectiveness is not reducible to individual components (e.g., teacher, peer learning, or materials) but emerges from the system as an interconnected, self-reinforcing whole. These insights reinforced the need for careful, culturally informed, and well-supported implementation of Montessori approaches in inclusive settings.

Conclusion

Montessori education offers a powerful bridge between developmentally appropriate practice and inclusive education, directly challenging the systemic isolation, restrictive placements, and procedural barriers entrenched in traditional educational systems. Thoughtfully prepared environments, sensory-rich materials, and opportunities for autonomy enable children with disabilities to reclaim agency, develop literacy, self-regulation, and social-emotional skills, and actively construct themselves (Lillard, 2017; Montessori, 1967a; Ramani, 2020). In this way, Montessori fulfills the vision introduced at the start: a childhood where every child can engage, grow, and thrive rather than be constrained by labels, rigid placements, or low expectations.

Montessori (1967a) framed this as a matter of educational justice, which she described as profoundly spiritual rather than procedural. For her, justice was not a flat fairness that forces every child to receive the same thing; she warned that this kind of equality merely drags everyone to the lowest level, "as if, in a spiritual sense, we were to behead the tallest in order to have them all of the same height" (Montessori, 1967a, p. 260). True educational justice, she argued, means giving each child the specific help they need to reach their fullest potential and spiritual stature. Vaz (2020) expanded this idea, noting that Montessori's vision of justice operates as an individual education prescription, an individualized education plan carried in the

teacher's mind, crafted uniquely for each child to support their path toward independence. Unlike standardized, procedural IEPs that can restrict and isolate students, Montessori's approach centers the child's lived capacities, developmental needs, and dignity, challenging the labeling systems that too often confine rather than liberate.

However, realizing this promise depends on more than philosophy; significant gaps in teacher preparation, fidelity, and understanding of inclusion persist, reflecting the challenges highlighted in the literature review on historical and philosophical foundations, principles as an inclusive framework, and empirical outcomes for diverse learners. Many Montessori educators remain unarmed with the specialized training needed to dismantle barriers, and research is limited on how they translate inclusion principles into daily practice (AuCoin & Berger, 2024; Danner & Fowler, 2015; Somma et al., 2024). Addressing these gaps is critical to ensure that Montessori's inclusive approach is not just aspirational but a lived reality that frees children from educational chains.

Bridging theory and practice requires connecting Montessori's developmental vision to classroom realities. Evidence has shown that autonomy, purposeful activity, and structured freedom can shatter the constraints of conventional schooling and unleash the potential of every child, yet implementation is uneven without targeted professional learning and systematic study (Kersna et al., 2025). By tackling these challenges directly and weaving together the historical insights, core principles, and empirical evidence reviewed in this review, Montessori can forge truly inclusive environments that honor, amplify, and defend every child's potential, bringing full circle the childhood imagined in a world bound by systemic constraints—one where no child is chained by labels, underestimated, or excluded.

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