

MERGe

at 20TH MONTESSORI EUROPE CONGRESS:

MONTESSORI FROM THE INSIDE OUT, Dublin 11-12.10.2019

MERGe meeting, Thursday, October 10th

The conference of ME took place in Dublin from 11-12 October and was entitled "Montessori from the inside out". It was preceded by meetings of active members of the working groups of Montessori Europe (10.10.2019, including the Montessori Europe Research Group (MERGe). The aim of MERGe is to assist Montessori teachers in performing action research and how they can use it for their professional development and teaching.

MERGe meeting was attended by researchers from the Netherlands, Bulgaria and Poland: Patrick Sins and Jaap de Brouwer (Saxion University), Dessy Stoeva (Sofia University), Beata Bednarczuk (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University) as well as experts in the field of Montessori teachers training from Great Britain and Norway: Penny Jones, Director of Learning Montessori St Nicholas and Sarah Kennedy-Berge, Pedagogical Leader, Waterpark Montessori International.

The topic of our discussion involved the purposefulness, principles and organization of action research by Montessori teachers. Examples of teacher's research projects were presented by Penny Jones and Sarah Kennedy-Berge (handouts of experts presentation are available at: [merge-me-congress-handouts](#)). Participants agreed that action research is an important part of the Montessori teachers' training program, serves personal, professional development purposes, contextualizes our teaching practice and contributes to maintaining the attitude of being a reflective practitioner. The ability to conduct action research relates to the idea of being responsible for the educational work according to Montessori core principles. The aim engaging in action research is that practitioners are actively involved in reflection on his/her own practice through recognizing strengths, limitations and problems that relate to children's development and learning, so - what was underlined by Penny Johns. Event though teachers' projects are associated with local insights and adaptations, they relate to the fundamental problems of everyday school life. In addition, it was emphasized that the idea of sharing results with other Montessori teachers creates the chance to inspire others and builds a sense of personal success. **The idea to include students and practitioners to present their own action research (AR) projects was strongly recommended by all meetings participants and will be considered as the contribution of MERGe to the next ME conference.**

Despite different approaches to organizing the AR cycle, which originates, among others from a different cultural context, several critical issues for teachers' action research projects were mentioned during the discussion, such as: the formulation of the right questions-problems, review of the literature to gain interpretative perspectives, introducing changes into school practice, as well as

including children in the change process and observing and reflecting collected data. It has been noted that a particular kind of systematicity and rigor needs to be considered when conducting action research, which means that it cannot be carried out occasionally and spontaneously. Discipline in collecting data, asking research questions and verifying hypotheses is a central principle of the implementation of action research. However, what is the most important in teachers AR, is the independent, personal experience of research activities. To avoid randomness of AR projects teachers should be trained in research methods. Therefore, **it was decided to prepare an AR guide for Montessori teachers in Europe.**

At the end of the meeting, scientists from Saxion University presented a project related to the study of executive functions of Montessori students in primary education. Since Montessori schools vary in the implementation of the Montessori concept, the researchers adapted a questionnaire to assess the extent to which the Montessori concept is implemented in the classroom. They collected nearly 500 questionnaires filled out by teachers of kindergartens and schools in the Netherlands. They also **plan to collect data in other European countries, and plan to present the results of their explorations at the next Montessori Europe Congress. They need the help of European Montessori teachers to collect more data on Montessori implementation.**

MERGe on Friday, October the 11th

Workshop No 3

Dr Patrick Sins and Jaap de Brouwer leaded workshop: "What defines a Montessori school? Lessons from research". In this workshop they elaborated on and discussed an adapted version of a questionnaire developed by dr. Angela Murray and that was designed to assess the montessoriconcept. This questionnaire consists of three aspects that were found to be representative to gain insight into how the montessoriconcept was implemented in schools : *structure, curriculum* and *freedom*. Every aspect consist of several questions Montessori teachers can answer in relation to their own class. They presented the findings of administering the questionnaire by the Dutch Montessori Research group in the Netherlands. 449 Dutch Montessori teachers from 97 different Montessori schools in the Netherlands completed their questionnaire. In this interactive workshop they first presented the design, background and the results of the research on Montessori implementation in the Netherlands. After that they presented and discussed the results. Based on the findings Sins and De Brouwer concluded that teachers working in early childhood scored higher on Montessori curriculum and freedom compared to teachers in lower and upper elementary Montessori education. Teachers working in elementary score higher on group structure. Next, participants discussed the results in a small group discussion: what defines a montessorischool? Practical implications for effective implementation of the montessoriconcept were designed by the participants during the final group discussion.

ME AGM

During the first day of the congress (11.10), the goals achieved by MERGe and the plans for the group activities were presented at the Annual General Meeting of Montessori Europe members. For the period of the year since the congress in Sofia (2018), MERGe website was enriched with space for: publishing research projects (Stories from Montessori classroom) and research conference materials (MERGe ME Congress handouts). A research workshop was organized in Dublin. MERGe took steps to prepare and conduct a panel discussion in Dublin. Further activities are planned to collect and publish teacher's projects on the website, prepare a guide on AR, and take action to organize a research workshop during the next congress in Prague. A research project: Creative personal resources of Montessori teachers will be undertaken.

MERGe on Saturday, October the 12th

Panel discussion



On the second day of the congress, Dr. Patrick Sins moderated the panel discussion: *"Think big, start small: Improving Montessori teaching from the inside through research"*. The objective of the panel discussion was to have Montessori teachers share experiences to inform each other and others about how they can capitalize on doing action research to improve their teaching. More specifically, this panel discussion focused on enhancing Montessori teachers' understanding of: (a) the importance of doing research in their classroom, (b) the benefits of doing research and how this impacts their teaching, and (c) how their research outcomes helps to communicate and to substantiate their Montessori teaching to other stakeholders such as parents, policy makers, researchers and children. This contribution is part of the activities of Montessori Europe Research Group (MERGe) that was initiated during the ME conference in 2018. Among the invited panelists were: Penny Johns, Sarah Kennedy-Berge, Dessa Stoev, Mina Walsh, and Fabiola Neto.



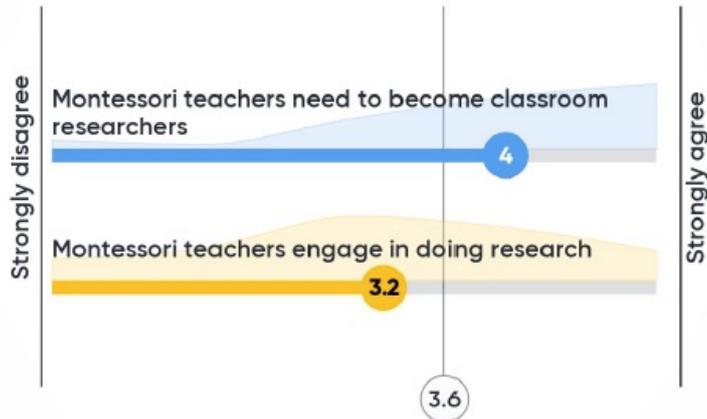
The first question that was also addressed to the audience using Mentimeter was: How do you define research? The most frequent concepts that were identified by the audience were “observation”, “learning”, “information” and “data”. In addition, the audience mostly perceived research in the Montessori classroom to involve teaching based on careful observations and that it entails collecting and interpreting data. Then, a lively discussion revolved around the issue of the scientific value of engaging in action research and the level of methodological rigor we need to attain. It was emphasized that the greatest value of AR was to instill in teachers the need to be engaged in a systematic analysis of their practice in order to reflect on their teaching. Also action research contribute to informing thoughtful adaptations in our practices to enhance our teaching, and to support and foster the Montessori teachers community. Also, the audience agreed with the panelists since the “contribution to improving our teaching” was chosen first as rationale behind conducting research in the Montessori classroom (see figure below).

Research in the Montessori classroom needs to...



However, although the audience agreed that Montessori teachers need to become classroom researchers, they do not necessarily engage in doing research themselves (see figure below). There seems to be a gap between intention and reality which can be closed by being trained in AR and by being involved in activities of MERGe.

Montessori teachers and research



The conclusion of our panel discussion can be summarized by “start small, think big”: as Montessori teachers we need to think big concerning how we can organize and optimize our Montessori education. You can contribute to this aim by starting small, by collecting data on a particular subject or by observing particular groups of students to inform your teaching. When asked about their take-home-message the audience replied that a culture of research in the Montessori school is important, that we need to remain critical and that we are entrepreneurs in sharing our results. One comment of a member of the audience summarizes it all stating that: “The discussion made many issues clear for me. And it’s clear for me – we need real research and I want to take part in it!”

