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Building Peer Independence among Children

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Abstract

The research was conducted to determine if grace and courtesy lessons could increase the peer to peer reliance in a new community of 12 children ranging in age from thirty-three months to four years old at a private Montessori school in a metropolitan area. It is rare to experience starting a new community and only having 12 children of the same relative age in a Montessori school. The study was conducted with grace and courtesy lessons, given an average of three times a week, on how to ask other peers for help and how to offer help to others. Data was collected over a six week period. The collected data showed whether or not the language from the grace and courtesy lessons was being used between the children. The results showed that the children were not yet functionally independent in many of the tasks that they were being asked to help with and therefore still had to ask an adult for assistance. Future research could repeat this process in a year's time when there is a broader age range of children or could focus on grace and courtesy lessons on how to resolve conflicts and encounters with children through practiced language.

Keywords: Montessori, early childhood, peer reliance, functional independence

Human potential begins within the child. What children learn and experience in their first six years of life influences their journey to reaching their fullest potential. We want our children and future humans of the world to carry certain characteristics with them such as independence, love and care for oneself and others, curiosity, compassion, and motivation. The Montessori Method is a style of education that encompasses these characteristics in the classroom environment. We want to start the children with this way of life so they can carry it forward into the world. Behaviors of caring for themselves, others, and the environment around them are modeled in Montessori environment by the older children and adults. These behaviors support the younger children's development of functional independence and characteristics of love and compassion for what is around them. A Montessori environment is a space that is prepared for the children by the guide or teacher that is for them to live and grow in. It encompasses specific materials for the children to learn from and specializes in four main categories: practical life, sensorial, language, and math. Through these areas in the environment, the children are given the opportunity to care for the space, learn about abstract concepts through concrete examples, and develop their social tendencies while developing concentration and feeding their natural desire to explore.

Montessori environments are known for enrolling children ages thirty-three months to six years in the same classroom. From observation of the researcher in the first year of starting a new environment that only had 12 thirty-three month to newly turned four-year-olds, it was clear that the strong support and role modeling of peers was not present. The children in this environment were not seeing this kind and helpful behavior modeled by peers as clearly as children in a full mixed age classroom do. This research topic was chosen to focus on the importance of helping very young children learn to help others.

Montessori education emphasizes the child's growth of functional and social independence. Dr. Montessori began her first school in Rome, Italy with children who came from a variety of backgrounds and ultimately needed a safe place to be during the day. It was from this experience that she discovered what following the child really meant. Through her observations of these children, she was able to see what natural tendencies they possessed and how capable they were of developing functional independence at a young age. Functional independence is when a child is able to care for himself in a way where he can dress, eat, and make choices on his own. Montessori education relies on the characteristics of a prepared environment and an adult that acts as a guide for the children to support the development of independence. The environment functions as a space for the children to live and operate as their own community. The guide's role is to observe the children, present new activities to them when they are developmentally ready based on the observations, and to prepare the space for the children to live and explore. These environments include children of mixed ages so that the older children can help the younger ones by modeling care of the environment, giving presentations on the activities they know, and modeling social behaviors on how to live in the space together.

When starting a new Montessori environment, it is typically done in a three year process to grow to the full range of three to six year olds. The first year in the environment, the guide starts with ten three-year-olds who are then four-year-olds in the second year as the guide adds ten new three-year-olds, and so on for the third year. Growing at this relatively slow rate gives the children the opportunity to learn how to function in the environment in the most successful ways so they can be leaders and strong role models for the younger children that are welcomed into the environment each year. The process of starting a new environment is unusual to experience as a Montessori guide; most environments in schools have been established for years. In the case of researching in

this new environment, the researcher wanted to provide more opportunity for the young children to learn how to rely on one another and ask for what they need in order to be even more independent.

An important part of the Montessori Method for supporting the child's self awareness and growth in independence is providing grace and courtesy lessons. Grace and courtesy lessons are spoken lessons given to the children by a guide in a neutral setting. They are situations that are acted out and practiced, providing language for the children to use when they encounter a similar situation in their future. These lessons are given in Montessori education daily. Since these lessons were already present in the environment, it was the most natural and non interruptive way to implement the research on how to help children build more independence among their peers. The reliance of the adult in a new environment with younger children is typically stronger than when in an established environment where the older children take on responsibility of setting an example of how to operate in the space. The grace and courtesy lessons specific to this research for the children included scenarios on how to ask a friend for help, how to offer help, and also many reviewed lessons on how to accomplish tasks that many children were asking for help to complete.

From observation in the first year of a new Montessori environment that only has 12 thirty-three month to newly turned four-year-olds, it is clear that the strong support and role modeling of peers is not present. The problem that is being addressed in this action research project is: in which ways will grace and courtesy lessons and the support of same aged peers will affect young children's reliance on adults in the environment.

Review of Literature

Development is a natural part of our growth as human beings. Even though we all follow a similar developmental path, each person behaves and thinks differently. Education is an influence on development that children experience at different stages in their lives and in different dynamics

compared to one another. The guide's work in a Montessori environment is to help the children foster their own independence as they develop and to grow together as a community. As an educator, it can be difficult to not help a child and instead encourage him or her to find support among his or her peers. By having mixed ages in a classroom there are more opportunities for the children to learn from each other and follow their own interests rather than doing everything as a group.

The literature that has been reviewed provides an understanding of how related theories on human development, adult and peer interactions, and the issues with peer relationships can be supported by adults indirectly, leading to greater peer reliance. This culmination of research gives examples of how the relationships between teacher-to-child and child-to-child can grow and establish at different rates depending on the environment, educational style, and role of the adult within the classroom.

Consensus of Educational Theorists

Education and child development have been studied and experimented with for decades through various theories. Determining whether teacher-directed or child-centered education is most supportive for the child's education is often debated. The main difference between these philosophies lies in the emphasis that each one places on the child's freedom of choice and independence in respect to their learning initiatives and the nature of the teacher's control over them (Tzuo, 2007). Child-centered philosophies typically focus on the child's individual interests and providing freedom for the child to create his own learning through the opportunity to choose from the variety of activities or lessons in the classroom (Tzuo, 2007). The teacher-directed philosophy places more emphasis on the teacher's control over the exploration of learning the child is exposed to in his educational experience (Tzuo, 2007). The teacher-directed curriculum typically lines up

with the more traditional educational system that exists in the United States rather than the non-traditional educational styles like Montessori. However, different theorists, such as Piaget, Montessori, Dewey, and Vygotsky have dedicated their lives to understanding the depth of the child-centered curriculum (Tzuo, 2007).

Contrary to having the teacher in charge, these theorists support the child being the center of the developmental path they experience in education. According to Piaget's theory on child development and upholding child-centeredness in education, the teachers in the environments are there as observers; they prepare the space and allow the children to explore (Tzuo, 2007). Piaget believes that the children should experience self-discovery through the opportunity to independently explore an environment and interact with his peers, implying that educators may not interrupt children when they are engaged in learning and play (Widger & Schofield, 2012). Similarly, Dr. Montessori also viewed the adult's role as an observer and guide for the children. She believed in the importance of giving children the freedom to choose and explore on their own in a space that is specifically prepared for those desires (Tzuo, 2007). Dewey's theory of the teacher's role in the child's educational experience is based on the idea of the child's ability to develop self-control within himself on his own. Dewey believed that teachers should focus on meeting the needs of each individual child rather than a group as a whole (Tzuo, 2007). Vygotsky's theory, although still based on child-centered education, is reliant on a different role from the educator as an observer. His sociocultural theory supports the idea that children are actively constructing their knowledge by interacting with one another, which also implies that for the educator to be supportive; her role must consistently interacting with the children (Widger & Schofield, 2012). Both of the theorists Piaget and Vygotsky emphasize the importance of peer cooperation with others, which increases their learning abilities and knowledge (Tzuo, 2007).

Adults Role in Children's Education

As much as the Montessori Method follows the child and believes that they are the center of the education, the adult still has a huge role. There has often been tension about what the educator's role is for the child. Some people think an educator's role should support an environment that is prepared to enhance social responsiveness while others believe an educator should be purely dedicated on the growth of a child's academic skills (Tzuo, 2007). However, not all educators feel this balance is necessary and even the ones who do may find it difficult to support both aspects in an effective way. An environment with an educator who supports both the social and academic aspects of a child's growth is ideal (McClelland & Morrison, 2002). In an educational setting, there is a responsibility from the adult to aid in each child's developmental progress, as individually focused as needed. As children develop their social and physical skills, they may need guidance with how to control or interpret what they are experiencing both individually as well as interactively (Kemple & Hartle, 1997). Although it can be a confusing balance of helping children learn through collaboration with both adults and peers and providing the opportunity for children to experience individual exploration and reflection, it is important to support both academic and social learning (Widger & Schofield, 2012). While considering both of these responsibilities, it is important to consider the relationship that the child has with the environment, the adults, and his peers.

Set-up of space and teachers. While each child has his own way of learning, consistency in the classroom environment can aid every child's experience. Conventional education has the children changing spaces and teachers each year. The Montessori (a non-conventional) education has the same children in the same environment with the same adult for around three years (Ervin, Walsh, & Mecca, 2010). In a Montessori setting, a prepared environment is a space that has been well thought about and organized in a way that feeds the social and individual needs of the

development of the child. A teacher can prepare and influence child interactions through the preparation of the environment and space, by individually coaching children on practicing their skills for conflict resolution, and by being a facilitator in a young child's conversation as it is happening (Kemple & Hartle, 1997). As important as it is to have a space that supports the independent growth of a child especially in facilitating his own peer relationships, there can be instances where an immediate interruption is needed from an adult. Dr. Montessori believed that these interruptions are needed as a developmental part of a child's journey to help him back on his path to grow socially and spiritually if the behavior shown was dangerous or destructive to himself or others (Tzuo, 2007). Therefore, the adult plays an important role in the setting of the classroom as she gains understanding of when to be more present and when to step back and purely observe.

The teacher's role in supporting peer reliance in early educational settings can happen in a variety of ways. Peer relationships are healthier when given more examples of common language and shared experiences than by simply just existing in the same proximity (Kemple & Hartle, 1997). A study focused on comparing self-regulation in children from both Montessori and non-Montessori classrooms was done over the span of three years. It was done with children who had the same teacher and environment for all three years, Montessori, and children who had a different adult and environment each year, non-Montessori. The children who were with the same adult all three years, in the Montessori environment, had more positive results of self-regulation and awareness to their interactions with peers (Ervin, Walsh, & Mecca, 2010). It seems that with more consistency in the social dynamics from both the adult and peers, the children who were in a similar environment for longer seemed more aware of how they were interacting with others (Ervin, Walsh, & Mecca, 2010).

Social interactions. Communication and relating to others is an important aspect of a child's success and quality of life. As children develop socially, there are many skills that can be acquired through experience and guidance. Cooper and Farran (1988,1991) and Bronson (1994, 1996) who researched the introduction of social skills in children ages three to four, identified two subcategories of social behavior: learning-related social skills and interpersonal social skills (as cited in McClelland & Morrison, 2002). Cooper and Farran believed interpersonal skills are behaviors such as interacting with peers in a positive way including sharing and respecting others (as cited in McClelland & Morrison, 2002). Learning-related social skills include behaviors that are more aligned with listening and following directions as a child is able to stay on task and work with a group appropriately and responsibly (McClelland & Morrison, 2002). Being able to interact with peers in different scenarios is beneficial to the development of any child in their social growth.

As toddlers begin to socialize, there are necessary skills they need to learn about how to live in a group-based learning environment. They have usually developed or at least become aware of some of these social skills by the age of three, which is the time they enter the Children's House in Montessori education (Goodrich, Mudrick, & Robinson, 2015). The model that was used in this study to compare social skills and growth in children was based on parent-child relationships and how the importance of social interaction skills were highlighted to promote a positive experience with children adapting to a classroom experience (Goodrich, Mudrick, & Robinson, 2015).

When considering the ages of the children, some studies have found that there is a correlation between positive behaviors and social skills developed in the preschool to kindergarten transition. When children were perceived to be more sociable in preschool, it set them up to have more confidence and closer relationships with their teachers in kindergarten, resulting in more independence (Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000). As the adults in the classroom form

strong and supportive relationships with the children it is the hope for the children to then trust the adults as they encourage and redirect peer interactions among the children (Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000).

Challenges for adults. Adults face challenges in helping children develop their social skills. One aspect that has been studied is the role of interruption. Educators are challenged by the desire to interrupt or interfere with the interactions of children and in the activities they are engaged in (Widger & Schofield, 2012). It is important for the adult to wait and observe before he or she decides to interrupt a child. During this brief observation of deciding whether or not to interfere, the adult should think about if she is being invited to be involved by the child for the interruption or if she has put her own assumption on the situation in a way to include herself (Widger & Schofield, 2012). It is important for the adult to remember and think about her role in the child's individual and peer interactions. The ideal role of an educator in the Montessori Method is to provide guidance while being careful not to control a child's development of independence or provide unnecessary guidance (Widger & Schofield, 2012).

Another study that looked at the relationship between children and the teacher was done from the teacher's perceptions and focused on assessing the child's peer independence through the observations of closeness, conflict, and dependency (Thijs, Koomen, & van der Leij, 2008). The areas of conflict and dependency reflected on the mutual frustration of negativity towards an overdependence from the child towards the teacher experienced by both adults and children (Thijs, Koomen, & van der Leij, 2008). The findings that they had while focusing on the relationships between the teacher and child was the quality of a relationship is usually associated with positive emotional support, interactions with behaviors, and expectations that are appropriate and practiced (Thijs, Koomen, & van der Leij, 2008).

Challenges with peers. One thing to consider when influencing and supporting peer-to-peer relationships in young children is the contrast of behaviors that could occur. Peers can have a negative influence on one another's attitudes and social outlook (Bronson, 2000). As they share and help each other, they are setting examples of what it means to be a friend, a colleague, and a role model. When there are mixed ages in a classroom, ages thirty three months to six years, many of the older and more experienced children are natural role models to the younger ones. When there are only young children who are less experienced socially and academically, they only have each other to learn from, which could potentially slow down their social development.

Children are often observing negative role modeling from their peers as well which offers another opportunity for educators to guide these encounters to a more positive influence (Bronson, 2000). Modeled aggression learned from peers or adults in a child's life is a learned behavior that can be especially enticing to children if they are seeing attention being given to those aggressive children by adults (Bronson, 2000). The adult must look for ways to support the children in seeking help and guidance from each other in dealing with aggression so they can be successful without being dependent on the adult. In order to minimize this potential outcome of aggression, adults or caregivers can provide support and appropriate guidance by redirecting and addressing the negative behavior in a way that is not enticing for attention (Bronson, 2000). Some examples of ways to do this are by using neutral language such as 'I noticed' or 'That makes me feel' while using a calm tone of voice and body language. It is also good to address the behavior or issue once it has ended or become a neutral territory. It is through the adult modeling that peer interactions can also be learned and practiced among one another.

In Montessori environments, this practiced social interaction role modeling is done through grace and courtesy lessons. Guides are able to provide language for observed or predicted social

situations and interactions that can make an impression on the children in a situation where they can internalize it through practice and be successful in their future peer interactions (Bronson, 2000). The quality of the peer interactions can be looked at by observing if they are self-regulated in an environment where the adults are still supportive in a positive, non-intrusive way (Rubin, Bukowski, Laursen, 2009). These grace and courtesy lessons can also be used to anticipate situations that may arise for children. They can help build confidence in the children so that the peer-to-peer interactions come more naturally and have a common ground of trust.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed shows that the child's need for peer-to-peer relationships is a natural part of their development. The adult's role in supporting this process can be incorporated in a few different ways. When focusing on a young, new and not yet established Montessori environment, the adult's role is crucial in the form of providing grace and courtesy lessons for children to grow confidence and experience socially. When these lessons and this culture of community is present in the classroom, social skills and peer-to-peer reliance should grow and develop independently. In order for this to happen in a young classroom with fewer peers, there needs to be strong relationships of trust and role modeling from the adults with the children as well as guidance for language and demonstrations for skills. The children will learn ways to help one another and rely on each other for help as they are challenged with new ideas and tasks in the environment instead of relying purely on the adult. In return the adults will take great care in how and when they may interfere or disrupt a child or group of children in their social interactions as they grow confidence and trust in their own selves and each other. This study addresses the influence specific grace and courtesy lessons have on young children in hopes of them seeing their peers for support instead of only the adults in their community.

Methodology

The intervention that was being implemented was in the form of grace and courtesy lessons focused on asking and offering help to peers. Grace and courtesy lessons are a regular part of the Montessori method of education; the implementation of the research acted as a normal lesson presented in the morning cycle. It was not a new process for the children to experience. The purpose of implementing the grace and courtesy lessons served as an opportunity for the children to receive language and skills to ask for help and offer help to their peers. Small groups of children, two to six at a time, were invited to the lesson. The topic for the lesson was introduced, in the case of the intervention the lessons were on how to ask for help and how to offer help. The children were then shown an interaction prepared by the adult and one child on acting out one of the situations. The children in the lesson were then invited to practice the situation using the language and actions provided. The five data tools that were used to record the data collected from the intervention were: recorded observation on specific encounters of children asking and offering help to their peers, journaling on the researcher's reflections of each day and recording any nuances, a tally of who asked whom for help, a presentation log of the grace and courtesy lessons given and how the children responded to them and a community artwork to represent a before and after visual for the contribution on a piece about the environment. The research was done over the course of six weeks. The first week was focused on collecting baseline data, the second through fifth weeks were dedicated to implementing the intervention, and the final sixth week was focused on collecting concluding data.

The first week of research was for collecting baseline data of what the existing behaviors were in the environment. During this week, an observation form was one of the main methods used to determine the overall feel of the community. It was used to see how often children openly helped

one another or instinctively went to an adult for help first. If there were children who had difficulty in helping, a record was taken of how they solved the conflict and became successful with the task. As these situations were observed, an observation form (see Appendix A) was filled out listing the child or children who were involved, a description of the support that was needed, and then the steps that were taken between the adult and the child or the child and his peers to address the situation that needed assistance. There was also a spot for the outcomes and additional notes on the observation form.

In addition to the observation form, journaling was used each day to make notes about the day, listing situations that happened. The journal reflections form (see Appendix B) had room for writing about what was out of the norm that day and then reflections and reactions of the researcher to the energy of each day. This journaling was meant to help with reflecting on the possibilities of why children did or did not ask their peers for help. There was also an Asking for Help tally form (see Appendix C) with a chart for recording tallies on what children were asking for help with, who they were asking first, and how that person replied.

The last data tool used in the first week was a piece of community artwork. It was displayed for one morning only. The artwork was a piece of 11x14" paper with a large circle drawn in the center. It was hung on the easel in the environment with a box of around ten crayons for the children to choose from. The children were approached in small groups for an introduction to the project, given the opportunity to contribute to it whenever they wanted throughout the morning, and asked what being helpful meant to them. The introduction that they were given included talking about how this piece of artwork was a place for them to contribute to when they were feeling an emotion like happy or frustrated. They could also contribute to the artwork whenever they felt like they wanted to and were welcome to come and talk to me about what they were drawing. When

children did choose to talk to me about their contribution informal notes were taken to keep track of the words they used to describe how they felt about the community. Children who voluntarily contributed were informally recorded with the number of times they added to the piece throughout the morning, what colors they used, and if they said anything about helpfulness or how they felt about the class of peers when asked. This classroom often did community artwork where the children were welcome to contribute to as they felt compelled so the process of this artwork was familiar to them prior to the intervention.

The implementation of the grace and courtesy lessons began during the second week of data collection. The lessons were given to small groups of two to six children nearly every day. The goal had been to do one every day; however, each day is different and unpredictable in many ways. It was not always possible to accomplish that goal. Therefore, an average of three lessons were presented each week instead. If this were to be implemented again at another time, it would be beneficial to present the grace and courtesy lessons daily or even twice daily to different small groups. The period of time that the research was being collected each week was between 9am and 11am. Observation, journaling, and tallies continued being recorded in the same way as the baseline week throughout the intervention weeks. In addition, a presentation log form (see Appendix D) was used to record which lessons were given on which days. Also recorded were how the children responded to the lesson, who was present as the lesson, and if it was practiced during the lesson in the heat of the moment between those children.

Over the span of the four week implementation, many of the grace and courtesy lessons that were being presented changed focus from how to ask for help to how to successfully complete a task. An example of this is a grace and courtesy lesson on how to roll up an oilcloth. An oilcloth is a piece of vinyl like material that is cut to the size of a placemat typically. Most of the activities that

the three-year-old children are introduced to in the beginning of their time in a Montessori environment include rolling an oilcloth. Many of the children even do this task multiple times per day; however, they are often not successful with it and need to ask an adult for help. When the adults were re-directing the children to ask a peer, observations soon revealed that most of the children still struggled on their own with rolling the oilcloth tight enough to fit in the ring or fastener. Therefore, the children were not able to find peers that were capable of offering successful help. In order to try and improve the implementation process of the research, the focus of the lessons shifted to include how to do many of the daily tasks, in addition to asking for and offering help.

During the fourth week, the implementation of grace and courtesy lessons were continued in a similar direction as in week three. The observation, journaling, and tallies also continued. In addition to the research that was happening in the environment, the lead guide added virtues to each week for the collective community to focus on. These virtues were chosen from a book, “The Family Virtues Guide,” designed for children to start learning about what it means, for example, to be generous or patient. The book of virtues offered guidance and example situations for the children to hear about and try to reflect on those behaviors in their own interactions. Although this was not a part of the intervention, it was another way for the children to be aware of their actions and behaviors. The virtue introduced during this week was helpfulness, which complimented the topic of research being implemented. It is possible that the introduction of this virtue heightened the children’s awareness to what being helpful was. The virtue of helpfulness was presented to the children at the collective gathering for around five minutes three times a week at the end of the morning.

The fifth week of research and final week of implementing the grace and courtesy lessons continued in the same way as it had in week four including more focus on the simple daily tasks. A second virtue, kindness, was introduced this week in the same collective gathering and discussed for an average of five minutes three days of the week. All of the data tools, observation, journaling, and tallies, continued to be collected in the same manner as in the previous weeks.

The sixth week was another baseline data collection period and served as the final week of the entire research process. It followed the same process as the first week. Grace and courtesy lessons that had been a part of the intervention were no longer presented in the final week. Instead the intervention went back to using the same data tools as the first week: observation, journaling, tallies, and artwork. The community artwork was presented in the same way as the first week. It was on the same paper, had the same sized circle in the center, was displayed for one day, and had the exact same crayons available for the contribution. The children who contributed, the number of times they contributed, what colors they used, and how they felt about the work they did, were recorded informally as notes for the researcher. This data tool was used to see if the children would choose different colors based on their feelings of community or if their overall interest in the project would change from the first week to the last. Another virtue, peacefulness, was introduced in the same way for the children. Although the virtues were not a part of the research, they became an important part of the community and relationship between the peers as well as the relationship between the children and adults.

To determine if the grace and courtesy lessons on how to help a peer were successful, data was collected using five data tools. These tools were implemented during the morning work cycle, from 9am to 11am, in a Montessori environment over the course of six weeks. There were 12 children in the classroom with an average of 11 in attendance each day. The information that was

collected through the data tools was based on the observations made by the researcher during the morning work cycle.

Analysis of Data

Through the implementation of this research, many themes and realizations about the children, their developmental age, and the community of the room as a whole became clearer. Although it was difficult to stay focused on recording the observations and implementing the lessons, the results and insights gained were well worth the additional effort.

Grace and courtesy lessons were presented during the four weeks of implementation and recorded in a presentation log. Over the course of the four weeks, the plan had been to present lessons on what language to use and what it looked like to ask for help, to offer help, or to agree to help a peer. How to ask for help was presented three times and how to offer help was presented once during the first week of implementation. The children practiced with each other during the lessons, which went well, according to the recordings in the log. Noted in the log was that these first lessons were chosen for the children so they would know how to approach a peer for help. Grace and courtesy lessons on how to roll an oilcloth, fold an apron, hang paintings up with clothespins to dry, and put books back on the shelf were also added to the log as a part of the implementation. The original problem statement of the research focused on showing children how to ask each other for help. Including the additional lessons on how to complete the above tasks in the last three weeks of the implementation supported the main focus, while creating a new theme of completing a task, and made it possible for the children to be more successful in their own functional independence as well as their interactions with others.

The variety of grace and courtesy lessons under the themes of helping and completing a task were presented an average of five times each week to groups of two to five children at a time over

the four week implementation. The data from the log is shown in the chart below: it shows the number of times each grace and courtesy lesson were given.

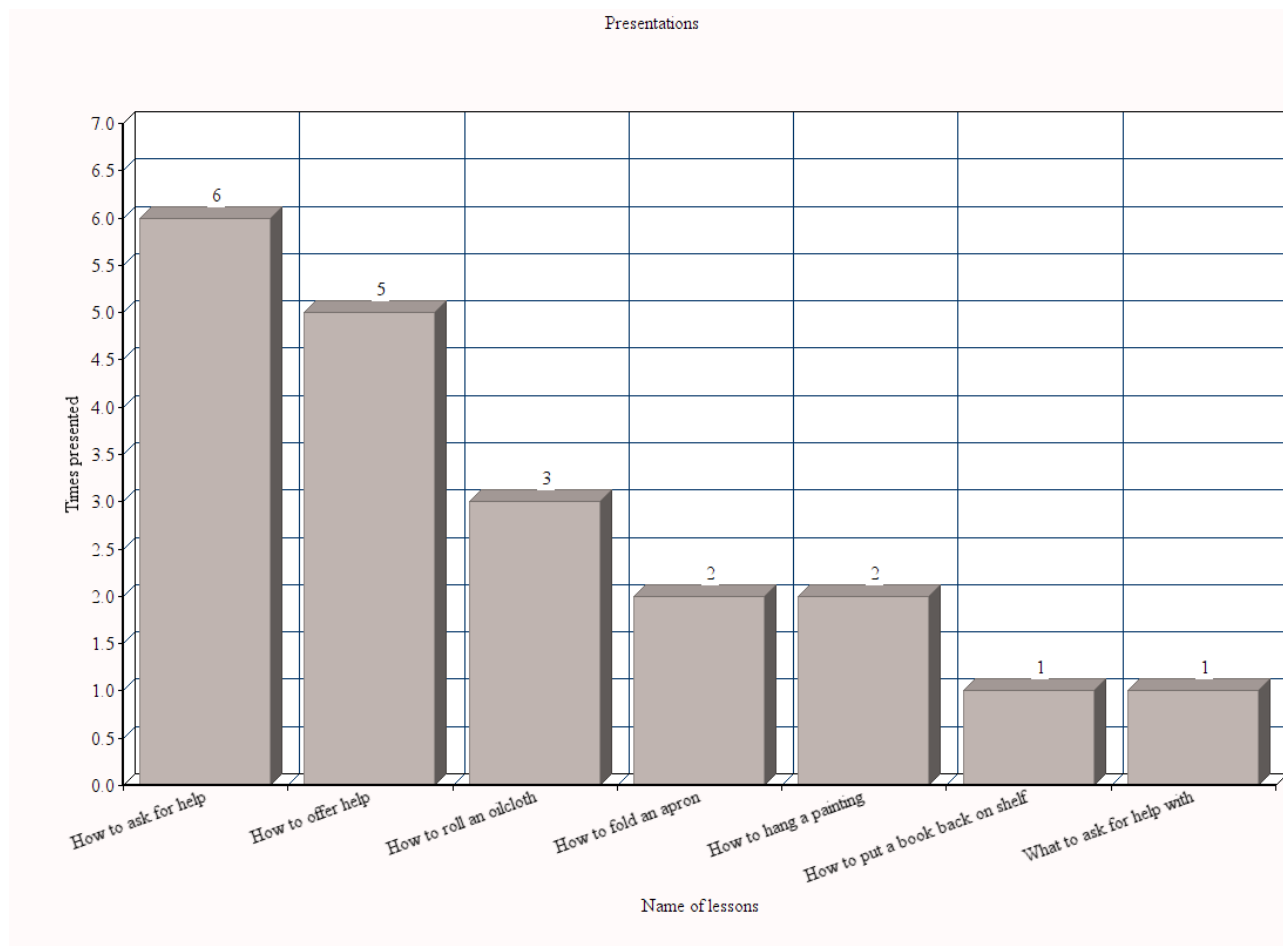


Figure 1: Number of times grace and courtesy lessons were presented.

As the children continued experiencing scenarios of being asked to help or needing to ask others for help in their daily life, these instances as observed were recorded through a tally of asking for help form. This form was for recording what the children were asking for help with, who they asked first-a peer or adult-, and what the outcome was. The charts below (figs. 2.1-2.6) display who was asked for help more often during the six weeks of data collection. The charts also display the level of difficulty that the task needing assistance with fell under. The rating of difficulty is a

generalization decided by the researcher based on where the skill level of the children was related to the tasks in the environment. The simple tasks included fastening aprons, hanging up paintings, putting books back on the shelf, opening a container, and other rather gross motor and beginning developmental activities. The difficult tasks included rolling an oilcloth, cutting thread, completing an independent activity and returning it to the shelf appropriately, and other activities that required a more developed level of motor skills. The challenging tasks included threading a needle, cleaning up a mess that they were unsure about the steps, and other activities that may be beyond where the child is developmentally.

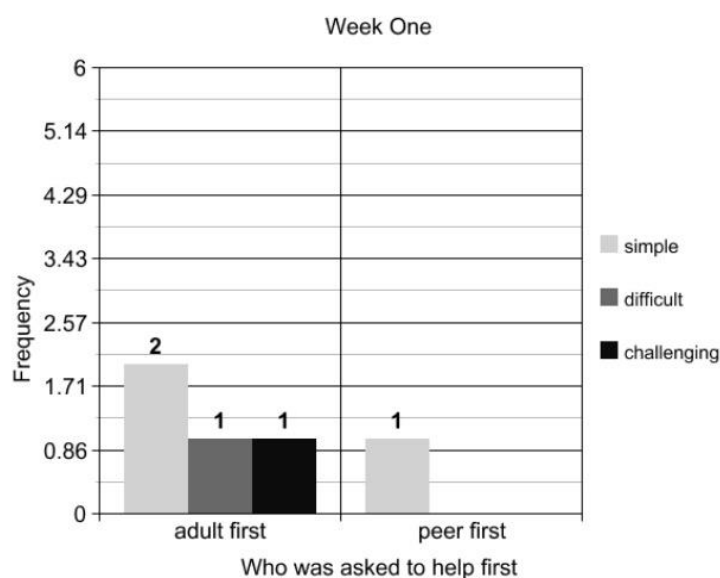


Figure 2.1: The number of times simple to challenging tasks needed assistance and who the child asked for help from first during week one.

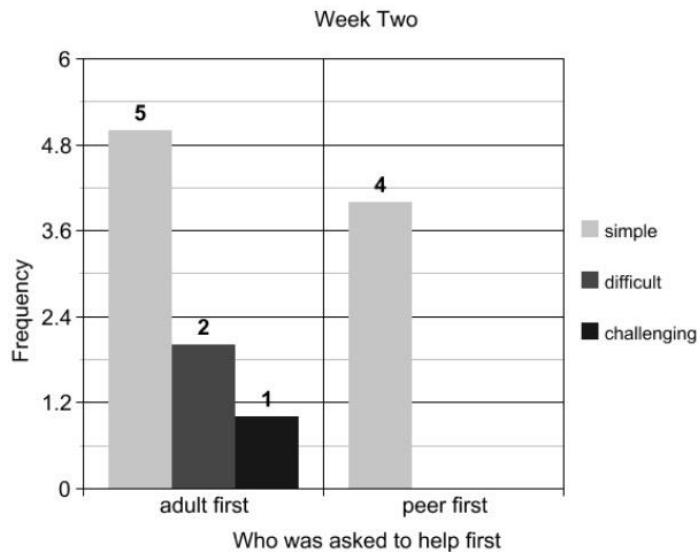


Figure 2.2: The number of times simple to challenging tasks needed assistance and who the child asked for help from first during week two.

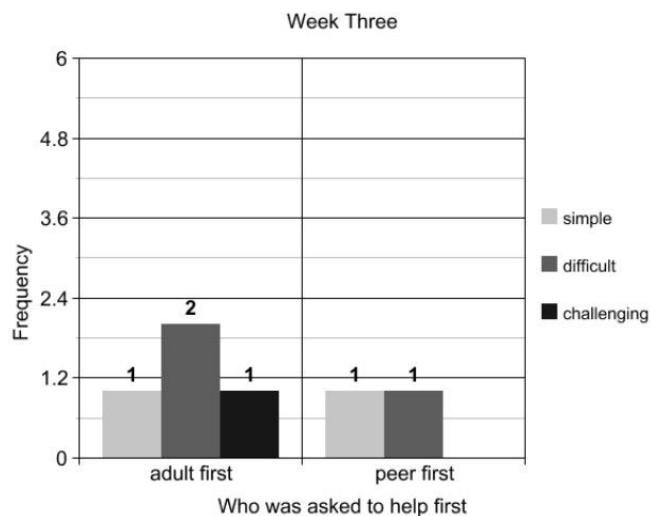


Figure 2.3: The number of times simple to challenging tasks needed assistance and who the child asked for help from first during the third week.

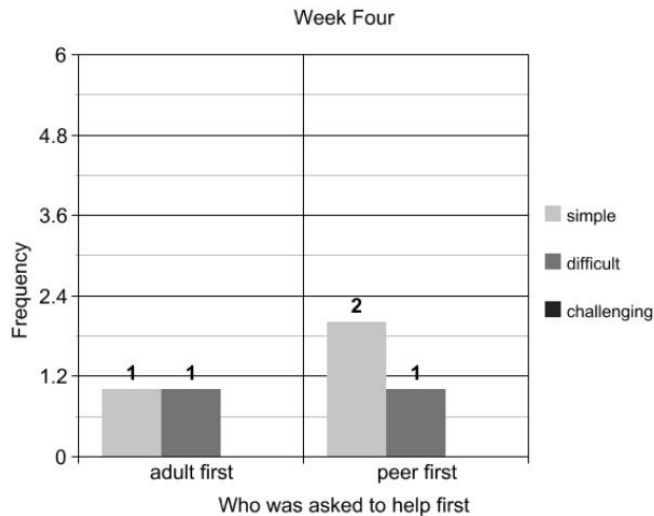


Figure 2.4: The number of times simple to challenging tasks needed assistance and who the child asked for help from first during the fourth week.

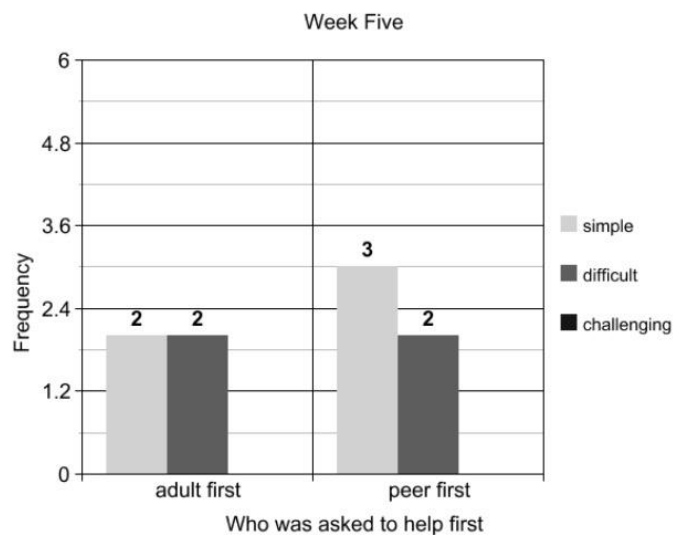


Figure 2.5: The number of times simple to challenging tasks needed assistance and who the child asked for help from first during the fifth week.

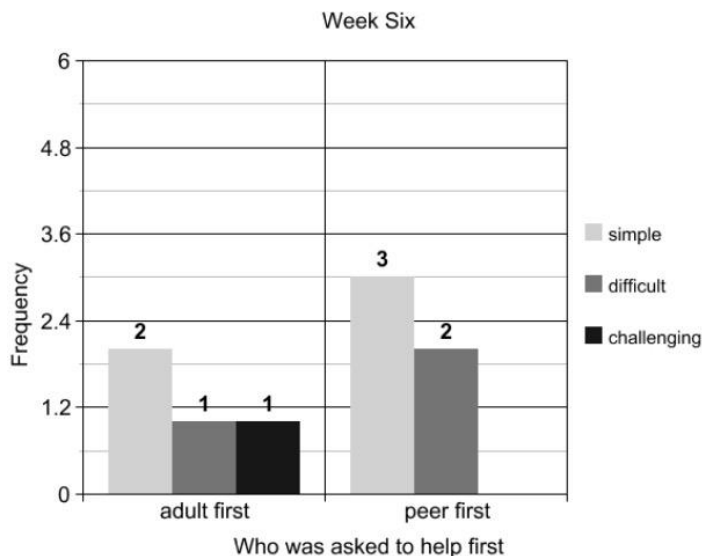


Figure 2.6: The number of times simple to challenging tasks needed assistance and who the child asked for help from first during the final week.

Looking at the data on the tally form from the first week compared to the sixth and last week, the children were still asking the adults for help first but more were also asking other children for help first, even with more difficult tasks. With a variety of things that children asked for help with, most children asked the adult for help first with all of the challenging tasks. The adults were instructed to re-direct the children who asked them for help first to another peer. The adult could help after the child had asked at least two peers and the task was still not complete. These graphs are purely for the representation of who the children sought out for help from first. It is also important to note that these tallies were based on observation of the researcher and her involvement of being asked for help by the children. There were sure to be many other exchanges of helping that happened but were not witnessed or given enough information to record.

Compared to the first week of the tallies, the final week shows that more children were asking their peers for help with the simple and difficult tasks than they did in the beginning. The form also showed that the children always asked the adult for help first with the most challenging

tasks. The last three weeks of the implementation recorded that children were asking their peers for help more often than they were asking adults for help. As the children continued to practice grace and courtesy lessons they became more aware of asking their peers for help before going straight to an adult for assistance.

The journal was used as a source and place for reflections on how the day was feeling, any specific insights, and any abnormal events in the day to be recorded. The journal entrees were not done every day. If something that stood out as an overall feeling of the room's energy, an event that was out of the norm, or a personal reflection of how the observer was feeling, it was reflected on in the journal. The intervention was done over a total of 23 days of school during the six week period. Out of those 23 days, there was a journal entry for 20 of them. The journal entrees were organized by common occurrences and then broken down into main themes. There were two themes that emerged from the journal entrees: one, the children were often working in a peaceful and concentrated way and, two, the class had many occurrences that were out of the ordinary in their classroom routine. There were 25 factors that were listed as out of the norm over the 23 days of implementation. These included things such as having observers and visitors, birthday celebrations, children being absent (one to four at a time), changes to the furniture in the environment, roles of the adults in the room shifting, and fire drills. Although many of these nuances are a part of the community aspect and natural progression of the classroom environment, they were out of the norm of having an uninterrupted work cycle. A reflection that became apparent from the entrees in the journal was that although the children were often working well and peacefully, they were also often asking adults for help with tasks that they had been presented how to do months beforehand. It became apparent that they needed support in these tasks that they were not developmentally

successful with. These reflections influenced the grace and courtesy lessons that were then presented for the remainder of the implementation.

The third tool on which data was recorded with was an observation form. This form recorded specific encounters between children where they displayed the act of intentionally helping another person. Encounters of conflict and being denied help were also recorded as the children needed extra support to get through the situation or task successfully. The form showed that the tasks children were having specific encounters of helping peers with were activities such as reminding their peers of how to care for books or use the books in the environment. Another theme from the observations was children proudly sharing and exclaiming that they did a task that they had previously asked for help with on their own. The form showed that these tasks included fastening their own aprons, rolling up their own working mat appropriately, and helping a friend because they could. What became an even clearer theme from these observation forms was that the children were becoming more aware of what it meant to help others by offering their help freely and then also agreeing to help when asked. There were many exclamations of, “I can help!” and “May I help you with that?” Although many of the children were not always able to help because of where they were developmentally with their skills, they were still excited to try.

The last tool used to collect data was implemented during the first and last week of the intervention. It was in the form of a community artwork piece. It was hung on the easel and before and after the children contributed to the piece, they were asked to offer words of how they felt about their classroom and the people in their classroom. Many of the words children shared during the first week, such as “happy” and “good”, were recorded on note paper.

The children were not required to contribute and not all did. Some children drew actual pictures (stick people) and then other children covered them up with their own designs. The age of

the children made the pieces of artwork more about color and involvement rather than actual designs and imagery because of their skill level. The second piece of artwork had fewer children contribute to it. Some of the words that they used to describe the environment and their peers were again “happy” and “good” but another child used the word “mad” and “bad” this time. It was never clear if they clearly understood what was being asked of them and if they know what the words they are choosing to respond with mean. It was a saddened feeling to hear those words being used to describe the space. And the second piece of artwork received less interest among the class as well. It appears emptier and more spread out compared to the first piece that is very full and used.

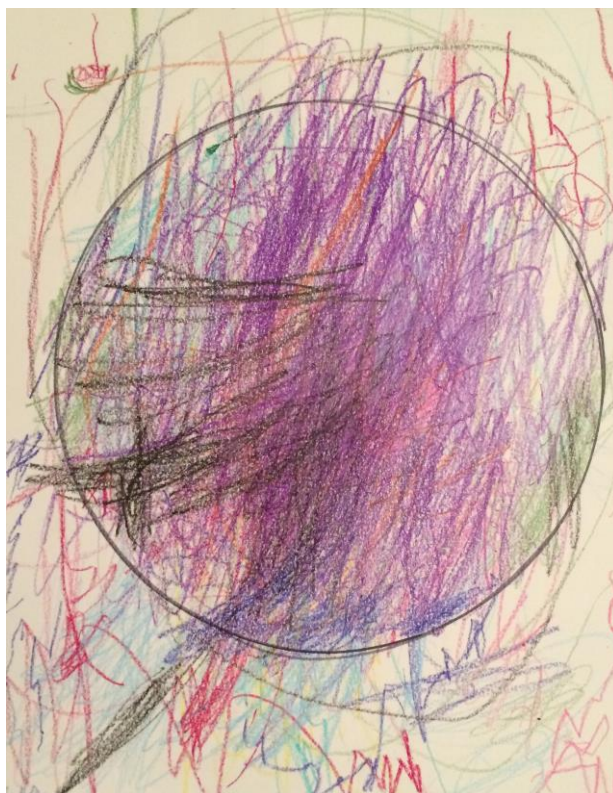


Figure 3.1: Image of the community artwork from week one of the intervention.



Figure 3.2: Image of the community artwork from week six of the intervention.

After analyzing all of the data that had been collected, it seems that there was not a huge increase in the children being able to help one another. However, there was a change in the awareness of what it meant to help a peer and an increase in children offering help even if they were not able to complete the task of helping. There was an increase in children asking their peers for help first with the more simple and difficult tasks even though they still weren't always successful. It did seem apparent that they needed more assistance in developing their own set of skills to be functionally independent on their own before they were capable of helping each other. This makes sense with their age, and will only continue to grow with them as they grow and develop.

Action Plan

The results of this research showed something different than what was expected. Once the intervention started and the lessons were being implemented, the needs of the environment became clear in a different way. The children were attempting to help one another but ended up also having to ask for help in order to complete a task. Many of these tasks were ones that the adults expected the children to already feel confident in doing successfully. It became clear that many of the children were unable to complete several of the tasks they were expected to help others with. What this means for the research is that even when there is a specific plan, a new topic or theme may appear. It was then up to the researching adult in the room to adjust accordingly in a way that could provide the most support and insight for the classroom. Although this adjustment did not have to take place for the research to be complete, it was appropriate in helping the children grow in their developmentally appropriate skill level.

The children in the room are constantly showing each other and the adults what they are capable of and interested in whether or not everything is observed by an adult at the time. The adults must be in tune with the children and flow of the classroom. The research was implemented in a familiar and consistent way for the children. They were already being presented grace and courtesy lessons; the only real difference during the four weeks of implementation was that the theme of the lessons repeated itself in how to ask a peer for help and how to offer help to another. By presenting the grace and courtesy lessons and looking for signs of the children using the provided language in their real life encounters, other challenges became apparent and presented an opportunity to shift the research implementation plan slightly. The observations were based on reflections of the children's behaviors, which provided a genuine feedback of what was needed and what was already working in the environment. The children needed more support with the simple

tasks of buttoning an apron and hanging up a painting with clothespins themselves in order to have the ability to help another. With the slight shift of the presentation's theme to focus on presenting the more functionally simple tasks, it provided an opportunity for the children to expand their own skills and practice by helping others. The added presentations helped the original focus of the research, which was peers helping one another instead of relying on the adults as heavily, become possible. The children became more aware of what helping others really looked like through examples of their peers and the adults modeling it in the environment. The results of the implementation were successful in many ways but in different ways than the research plan originally set it up for.

Realizing the children were so young that they needed to be able to work with their own functional independence first in order to be successful in helping others changed the way that I see the children. It was a huge reminder of what Dr. Montessori observed in her experiences with children: that the children need to be able to help themselves before they can help others. In the beginning of this research when the problem statement was being formed, I wanted to challenge the room in expecting the three-year-olds to be able to step above what was typically expected of them, for them to work as a community without as much support from the adults. The result of the research changed how I see my role as a guide to also a non-biased observer in the environment and changed my expectations of the children. It is so important to take people as they are and challenge them in appropriate levels for their development. As these children are old enough to know what helping is and offer help to each other, they still need to have their own confidence first in order to feel a benefit from helping.

I believe the research that was done in our classroom had an impact on both the children and the adults in becoming more aware of what helping really means and looking at our small

community in a new light. Many children are often heard saying, “I can help!” or “Could you help me with this?” They want to help but are often not able to follow through with their gracious intention due to their own level of development being at a similar level. Grace and courtesy lessons are still being presented in many different topics based on observations of what is needed to best support the children. Lessons on offering help and asking for help continue to be presented, but not as often per week as they were during the implementation. By having this theme still present in the environment, it is continually impacting the children and how they see and present themselves to others. The research also changed the way the adults observe in the room. I am more aware of how I present myself in front of the children and in how my observations of their actions may be a result of their natural development versus expecting them to act a more mature way than their age allows. I think this opens more doors for the children to feel comfortable and in a better relationship with their peers and adults they interact with.

From the observations I collected during the implementation of research, I see many different ways I could change the process of this research problem in the future. It would be interesting to conduct this research again next year when there is a broader mix of ages in the room to see if the children become less reliant on the adults. Other future action research topics that surfaced through this project were along the themes of conflict resolution, distinguishing friendships, and how to redirect the interest of free play-pretending in the environment. Through the intensified observation from the intervention, it became clear that the children were also often coming to the adults for assistance in solving conflicts between peers instead of addressing one another directly. It would be a great addition to the environment to focus on how to address these conflicts directly between the children without needing as much outside support so they can be independent in these situations. It was also observed how often children were referring to each other

as best friends or stating that they did not like a certain peer. As emotions and feelings are also developing at this age, an important topic to address would be how to distinguish what is appropriate and kind to say about friendships. New grace and courtesy lessons would be developed to implement this idea. I also observed children incorporating a lot of imaginative play in their work or just in their conversations around the environment. It would be interesting to find other avenues for them to explore this creativity in more realistic ways.

As the children continue growing and developing, the needs and challenges in the environment change. Some of the concerns work themselves out as others continue to surface. The role of the adult has a strong impact in the environment from focusing his or her observations and finding how to implement change in a positive way for the children. While I came into this project hoping to discover how to help the children become more reliant on one another instead of an adult, I instead discovered that they are in need of a consistent and understanding role model. This role model is often found in the older children and the adults in a Montessori environment. The discovery of needing a strong presence of an adult role model makes sense and serves as a reminder that the adult's role and consistency in behaviors and actions in a young environment is even more important to be done well. In the young environment I am a part of this year, it is clear that the role modeling is done through the adults in the room rather than peers. As the children grow and develop they will become those role models for each other.

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Appendix A

Observation Form

Date:
Children Involved:
Time of Incident:
Description of the support that was needed:

Was the adult/reliance needed?:

Steps that were taken between the adult and the child or the peers:

Outcome:

Notes:

Date:
Children Involved:
Time of Incident:
Description of the support that was needed:

Was the adult/reliance needed?:

Steps that were taken between the adult and the child or the peers:

Outcome:

Notes:

Appendix B

Journal Reflections Form

Date:

Time:

Notes about the day:

Out of the Norm:

Reflection/reaction:

Date:

Time:

Notes about the day:

Out of the Norm:

Reflection/reaction:

Appendix C

Tally of Asking for Help

Name:

Date:

Student asked for help with..	Student Asked Adult first	Student Asked a Peer first	The Asked Child Offers Help	The Asked Child Denies Helping

Name:

Date:

Student asked for help with..	Student Asked Adult first	Student Asked a Peer first	The Asked Child Offers Help	The Asked Child Denies Helping

Name:

Date:

Student asked for help with..	Student Asked Adult first	Student Asked a Peer first	The Asked Child Offers Help	The Asked Child Denies Helping

