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Monkey See Monkey Do: Modeling Positive Behavior in the Classroom

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Monkey See Monkey Do: Modeling Positive Behavior in the Classroom

An Action Research Report
By Stephanie Espe
Abstract

The research experiment was conducted at a dual language Montessori school in a lower elementary classroom that contained first grade students. The classroom contained thirteen students in total, with five boys and eight girls, and two head teachers. The research investigated if peaceful lessons (grace and courtesy lessons) and peaceful teacher modeling would affect the student’s behaviors and concentration in the classroom. The research began with baseline data collection through student interviews, student work, and a behavior tally sheet completed during the great work period in the morning. After the first two weeks of school, daily peaceful lessons were conducted with the students, and the teacher made mindful changes, to model positive language and behaviors in the classroom. The data concluded that peaceful lessons and teacher modeling had a positive effect on the behavior and concentration of the student’s in the classroom. Peaceful lessons and teacher modeling will continue once a week to prolong positive student behaviors in the classroom environment.
Being the only teacher in my elementary one classroom with 16 students, I often found myself overwhelmed by their needs and behaviors. Frequently I hastily tried to solve situations in the classroom instead of taking the time to listen and understand the needs of the children. I found myself being “un-Montessori,” using a loud authoritative voice at times, and not fully taking the time to look at the whole child and their needs. Instead, my focus was on lesson completion and checking follow-up work. Therefore, I found that the students had a hard time with their grace and courtesy in the classroom. They were modeling my quick reactions with their peers, and not taking the time to understand the needs of each other. I was concerned that my E-1 Montessori student’s behaviors were taking time away from their academic learning.

I noticed that I was not choosing the correct reactions and language to promote a peaceful and respectful classroom. The students in the classroom had difficulties in expressing themselves appropriately in school, and my reactions to their behaviors were causing others to act out or to become distracted from their learning. I realized the students needed to spend extra time understanding themselves and their classmates. If they could spend less time arguing and distracting each other, they would have more time for enjoying and concentrating on their work. In order for me to do this in the classroom, I needed to make some changes in how I model peacefulness and respect to my students.

Teaching in a new elementary one Montessori classroom at a Montessori school provides me with a wonderful setting in which I am able to perform and collect my data for my research. However, my elementary one classroom is different from a regular Montessori elementary classroom for two main reasons. The first reason is my classroom is not set up as a traditional Montessori classroom because it doesn’t have the usual three-
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year student age range (6-9 years in age). The classroom is new and is made up of only first grade students because of the growth of the school. My classroom is also unique to a traditional Montessori elementary classroom because I am teaching in an integrated dual language classroom. I am the head English Montessori teacher in the classroom and there is a Spanish co-teacher. The students in our classroom receive Montessori lessons and follow-up work in both Spanish and English daily and have two full time teachers in the classroom at all times.

I currently have 13 first grade students in my classroom, with five boys and eight girls. Even though my classroom is not a traditional Montessori classroom, it provides me with a chance to explore and research with first year students to see if the changes I have made in the classroom can promote and create positive and respectful students. By the end of my research, I am hoping to have students who have a great understanding of themselves and their peers. In turn, they will be able to spend more time concentrating and enjoying their learning, and less time being distracted or bothered by negative behaviors in the classroom.

I began my exploration by investigating other professional’s research in the area of creating a peaceful classroom. My research led me to look at various approaches from both traditional and Montessori classroom settings on how to create a peaceful and respectful classroom environment. Massari expresses her strong feelings towards educating children’s emotional intelligence. Massari (2011) states, “What was once considered a value as basic as pencils and paper has been left behind in the educational race to the top. There is a growing body of evidence, however, that suggests that getting back to the golden rule through the use of social and emotional learning strategies may be
a worthwhile investment in promoting an academically solid, bully-free learning environment” (pg. 8).

Haskins (2010) describes the need to look at the spirit of the child when looking to improve behaviors and academic success in the classroom. “The intended outcomes, when children are armed with such an inner toolbox of resources, include self-awareness, reduced stress, improved impulse control, increased concentration, and compassion for others” (pg. 73).

Another area of consideration for creating a peaceful and respectful classroom environment is modeling peace and positive behaviors. Crawford (2005) states, “If we are going to teach peace in the primary grades, it is necessary to remember that actions speak louder than words” (pg. 322). Crawford also believed that formal and informal lessons on positive behavior and conflict resolution would give the students the tools that they need to be more respectful and peaceful in the classroom.

Many researchers suggested that students should be a part of creating rules and deciding in class procedures. The teacher should also give positive reinforcement when he or she notices a child following those classroom rules and procedures. Picotti (2010) states, “through the application of positive reinforcement, teachers facilitate positive, caring, atmosphere, by celebrating students who comply with classroom rules and/or participate in learning tasks” (pg. 13). Trussel (2008) agreed with Picotti and thought that if students were given the opportunity to help create the rules, and discuss what each rule means, there should be less behavioral problems as the children have a clear understanding of what is expected of them.

When looking to create a respectful and peaceful environment one should also consider looking closely at the arrangement of the classroom. Guardino and Fullerton
(2010) state, “Environmental modifications are a preventative, whole class approach that may decrease chronic behavior problems, prevent behavior problems for students who are at risk, and allow children with minimal or no problems behavior to access learning without interruptions” (pg. 9). Additionally, classroom environments should include a peaceful area that is accessible to the students. Haskins (2010) understood that there will be times in the day when students need a time for “inner peace” when they have become frustrated, over stimulated, or upset, and need to let out their feelings in a positive way. The peaceful area would be that place for the children to go to release their feelings.

Through my research I yearned to learn and implement positive ways to promote a peaceful classroom using the power of words. Through teacher modeling and lessons, my goal for the students was to improve their behavior so the student’s academic learning would not be interrupted. From this goal, I was able to develop and create the following research question: What effects will teaching and modeling grace and courtesy lessons in the Montessori E-1 classroom have on student’s behaviors and concentration during work time?

Description of Research Process

Before I could begin collecting data for my action research question, I needed to collect baseline data from my classroom. I began collecting data on the first day of school using a behavior tally sheet that I created (Appendix A). The tally sheet was looking at two things: whether the students were concentrating during work time, or if the students were off task, causing disruption during work time. I wanted to be very specific in the off task behaviors as it would provide me with information that I could use later when developing grace and courtesy lessons that I would teach to my students. The categories
for disruptive behaviors were talking loudly, not working, inappropriate language / actions, and other. Each morning I would observe the classroom and mark tally marks on my sheet in half hour increments. By observing my classroom of students every half hour I was able to see what times of the day certain behaviors were occurring and then could use my future lessons to try to solve those problems. I collected baseline data using my tally sheet for the first two weeks of school (9 school days). (The baseline tally sheet that was used can be found in Appendix A.)

During my baseline data collection, I also collected a piece of work from each student each week. The collection of work was to provide me with an example of the students work before any grace and courtesy lessons were taught. This provided me with baseline work collected to see if the quality and concentration on their work improved after receiving lessons on grace and courtesy.

At the end of the first two weeks of school I also conducted my first baseline interviews of my first grade students (Appendix B). For the baseline interview I had two groups of five students and one group of three students go with me to the library where I asked them questions about our classroom. I wanted to get the students out of our classroom setting for this so other students in the classroom would not distract them, and therefore, I could have their full attention. I informed the students that I would be asking them questions about our classroom, because I was curious to hear their opinions about our classroom environment. I asked them to be honest with their answers so that I could fully see their point of view, and so I could use their information to help make our classroom a better place for them to learn. I informed my students that I would be recording their answers to my interview questions on my computer so that I could completely concentrate on what they were saying instead of worrying about writing down
all of their responses. This was very beneficial as I was able to concentrate completely on my students, and it made it convenient for me to go back and listen to their ideas about the classroom. I asked my small groups of students the following questions in my baseline interview (Appendix B):

1. What are some problems you see in the classroom during work time?
2. What are some things that happen in the classroom that distract you?
3. What are some good things in the classroom that help you concentrate and get your work finished in the classroom?

As my baseline data collection finished after the second week of school, I was armed with a significant amount of data to begin my action research in the classroom. Each day from 1:00 pm to around 1:30 pm I gave my students peace lesson to implement grace and courtesy lessons in my classroom. The first day I designed my lessons so that as a class we talked about what rules we needed in the classroom and why they were needed. I let the students lead the discussion as I wrote down their answers. After a wonderful discussion, I took their answers and talked about how each of their rules fit under three simple categories: To be safe, be respectful, and to be responsible. We talked about what these words meant and how their rules fit into one or more of these categories. I wanted to have the students involved in this process. I also wanted to have three positive rule statements so that the students could remember our rules easily throughout the day. Each day, starting September 16th through October 16th I taught a lesson to the students that would encourage peaceful and respectful behaviors in the classroom. My goal was to begin my lessons with classroom rules, so we could start to establish a respect for our classroom, materials and peers, and we could begin building
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our classroom community. However, from researching other professionals, I found out how important it was for the children to understand themselves and how special they are inside and out before I could start addressing other topics in our classroom. Therefore, for the rest of my first week and continuing into my second week of lessons I focused on giving lessons that would inspire each child to have a greater understanding themselves. After each lesson taught I recorded how the lesson went, what kind of discussion occurred because of the lesson, and how I could improve or change part of the lesson to be more successful in the future (Appendix D).

As I did in my baseline data, I continued to collect data throughout my research process. Each day I observed my classroom and used my behavior tally sheet to record my student’s behaviors. I also continued to interview my students every two weeks (September 27th, October 11th, and on the last day of data collection on October 16th, 2013) using the same interview questions as in my baseline interview but also including the following questions (The action research interview sheet can be found in Appendix C):

4. What have you learned from our peaceful lessons in our classroom?
5. Do you think they have helped with your concentration in the classroom, why or why not?

I also continued to collect one piece of work from each student in the classroom, to compare to other works collected in the baseline data collection and throughout the process of teaching my grace and courtesy lessons.

Throughout my research process, not only was I concentrating on the changes in my student’s behaviors and concentration, but I was also making sure to model positive
behaviors in the classroom. Throughout my month of research I was taking time to listen to my students if problems arose in the classroom, and modeled how to fix the problems peacefully. I also pointed out to my students when I made mistakes in the classroom to aid in their grace and courtesy learning process. For example, if my voice level got too loud I would say to the students; “I noticed my voice is getting too loud, I am going to try to use a more peaceful voice.” Or if I was not being careful with materials I would take the time to show my students and explain to them what I should have done, so that they could see that I too am always learning how to be more peaceful in the classroom.

Analysis of Data

After analyzing my data, I have come to find many positive correlations between giving peaceful lessons and peaceful role modeling with improvements in behavior and concentration in the classroom. Prior to starting the intervention, the classroom had many behavior problems. There were several students who tested boundaries and found it difficult to transition into the elementary one classroom setting. The new structure and academic rigor of elementary proved to be a challenge for some of the students in the beginning of the year.

The first week and a half of school I collected baseline data of behaviors of concentration in the classroom. This process proved to be difficult, as I continually wanted to teach students how to properly interact with each other and use materials in the classroom. As I began my research, I was enthusiastic and eager to teach and model behaviors in hopes that the research would prove the importance of grace and courtesy and peaceful lessons towards the student’s classroom learning environment.
To understand the attitudes of the students, I conducted an initial interview to know how the students viewed the classroom environment. In my first interview, I asked three groups of students the following questions:

- What are some of the problems you see in our classroom during work time?
- What is something that happens in our classroom that might distract you?
- What helps you complete your work in our classroom?

From these questions I was better able to understand the observations the students made about the classroom work environment. I conducted peaceful lessons based on the concerns the students expressed in their interview. The second and third interviews were conducted during and after the intervention with the students. I asked the three original questions as well as two additional questions to determine what the students learned from the peaceful lessons.
Student's Observations of the Problem Behaviors in Our Classroom

- Talking: 33%
- Playing/Being Silly: 24%
- Fighting: 11%
- Keeping your Hands to Yourself: 5%
- Other: 27%

Figure A reflects the student’s attitude throughout the interview process towards which problem behaviors in the classroom were the most disruptive. About half the class identified talking and silly behavior as the most problematic behaviors.
The connection between figure A and B was clear that behaviors that result in talking and loud noises (usually from silly behavior) were identified as the most disruptive behaviors to the student’s concentration. A student during the interview process revealed that, “Well when the boys are playing around and make too much noise, then I can’t concentrate very well, I don’t have enough energy to keep my eyes on my work and to keep working.”

It was revealed in the interview that the students believed that they needed to sit alone, work hard, and not talk to peers in order to concentrate in the classroom. When asked what helps students concentrate in the classroom and complete their work, one student said, “When I just ignore people, I don’t talk to anybody, and when I’m sitting by myself.” The student body’s beliefs on concentration are reflected in Figure C.
The student interviews demonstrated what the students learned throughout the implementation of the peaceful lessons and peaceful teacher modeling in the classroom.

Figure D reflects what the students have learned and retained from the peaceful lessons in the classroom. Figure E reflects how those lessons impacted the classroom environment according to the student body.
During the interview process with the students, many students spoke about what they had learned from Black Elk’s Medicine wheel story. One student said, “I remember Black Elk and his vision: the circle, the black road, the red road, and the tree. Black Elk saw when people walk on the road of difficulties, the tree started dying, and when people
were walking on the road of peacefulness, the tree started blooming with flowers.” It was clear to me as students in each interview group described their own memories of Black Elk’s Vision, that this story helped the students understand more about life, positive and negative choices, and the positive and negative impacts their choices have on themselves, and the people and environment around them.

When students were asked if the peaceful lessons have helped them concentrate in the classroom, students very quickly responded yes, but then had difficulties describing why they thought it had a positive impact on the classroom behaviors and concentration. One student stated, “Yes, because people are really peaceful at peaceful time, and people are being nice and helpful to other people, and the teachers really appreciate it.” Another student stated that the lessons “really, really, supports you, of people being quiet (the lessons help them concentrate because the other people in the classroom were working more quietly).”

Throughout the research a tally sheet was kept daily to record positive and disruptive behaviors in thirty-minute increments during the great work time period in the morning. The data in Figure F shows the difference the intervention made in positive behaviors in the classroom. The average baseline positive behaviors during the great period work time were 57.2 positive behaviors. After the intervention, positive behaviors rose to an average of 87.32 per morning work time. This showed an increase of an average of 30.12 more times per work period that students were making positive behavior choices.
There was an overall trend that negative behaviors decreased throughout the intervention. The most significant difference observed was the amount of students who did not work. Baseline data showed an average of twenty times students were observed not working during the morning. After the intervention, this number dropped to an average of about five. This was the intended consequence of the peaceful lessons in improving concentration of students in the classroom. Another significant change was the students who were observed talking loudly during the longer work period. Baseline data displayed that students talked loudly on average 8.4 times per day. This fell to an average of 1.9 times during the intervention. Talking loudly was one of the greatest
concerns expressed by the students during the interviews. The combination of students being more productive during the long work time with a reduction in loud distracting behavior demonstrates that the peaceful lessons had a successful impact on student learning and concentration as seen in Figure G.

After collecting a piece of work from each student during my baseline and intervention periods of my action research project, I was able to analyze the differences in quality of work. At the baseline collection of work, on average students works were sloppy, letters were written incorrectly, words were written incorrectly, some works were incomplete, and or not done to the best the of students abilities as shown in figure H. However, as intervention was put into place there was significant improvements in student’s quality of work done on their classroom assignments that can be seen in figure I and J. The correlations of the increase of students on task during work time shown
in figure G and the improvement of quality of work show in figure H, I, and J, leads me to believe that the peaceful modeling and lessons taught during intervention supports the students with their concentration during work time.

Figure H
(9-4-13)
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(9-18-13)
While making changes in the classroom during the action research intervention, I took notes on the observations I saw during our peaceful lessons. From my observations I noted the interest and
enthusiasm the students brought to each lesson. The students were more than willing to participate in peaceful lessons, making silence, and creating follow up assignments to our lessons. Students enjoyed and often times requested more time to discuss or role-play topics from that days peaceful lessons. Students definitely enjoyed the hands on interactive peaceful lessons, where they could be involved in their own learning. In one of my observation notes I wrote,

“This lesson was a great visual for the students to help them understand more fully the power of their inner self also known as their love light. The children responded wonderfully to the demonstration of the light behind the peaceful person shinning bright and related to the feeling inside and the dimming of their love light when they felt sad or angry. It was great to see the children going into the peaceful corner of our classroom that day and even days after to use the special bag to help them feel their love light shine more brightly. It also was a good way to give the children two new strategies to help them when they are feeling angry or upset in the classroom.”

The data collected throughout the action research supported my theory that peaceful lessons and positive teacher role modeling in the classroom, can help to create a peaceful learning environment where students can concentrate on their work. With less behavior interruptions in the classroom, the students were able to experience learning in a more peaceful and positive learning environment. It is amazing what can be achieved in the classroom by taking a short thirty minutes a day to teach students about themselves, others, and how to be peacemakers inside and outside of the classroom.
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References


Miss. Stephanie’s Action Research Tally Sheet

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<th>Times Tally’s are taken</th>
<th>Positive Behaviors</th>
<th>Disruptions in the Classroom</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Talking loudly</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not working</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inappropriate actions or words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30</td>
<td>Students working peacefully without disturbing others/ concentrating on their work/ helping others appropriately</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00</td>
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Appendix B
Baseline Interview Question sheets

Date: ______________________________

Group #_________
Names of students:

________________________________
________________________________
________________________________
________________________________
________________________________

1. What are some problems you see in the classroom during work time?

2. What are some things that happen in the classroom that distract you?

3. What are some good things in the classroom that help you concentrate and get your work finished in the classroom?
Appendix C
Interview Question sheet

Group #_______
Names of students:

_________________________
_________________________
_________________________
_________________________
_________________________

Date:____________________________

1. What are some problems you see in the classroom during work time?

2. What are some things that happen in the classroom that distract you?

3. What are some good things in the classroom that help you concentrate and get your work finished in the classroom?

4. What have you learned from our peaceful lessons in our classroom?

5. Do you think they have helped with your concentration in the classroom, why or why not?
Appendix D

Grace and Courtesy Example Lesson Plans

Date: Monday, September 16th

Lesson: Creation of classroom rules

Procedure: Have students discuss what they think the rules for our classroom should be and why. The teacher should record their answers on the board. After the children are finished the teacher should discuss how the rules the children have made could be placed under three rules: Be safe, be respectful, and be responsible. Explain to the children what it means to be safe, respectful, and responsible, and then begin by having them help place their ideas under each of the headings. Finish the lesson by having each child sign a poster of our classroom rules, agreeing to follow these rules while at school.

After lesson notes: The lesson went really well with the children. All children participated in the lesson and gave their ideas and opinions on what classroom and school rules we need. It was interesting to hear almost all of the children’s suggested rules were worded in a negative tone, for example: don’t run in the classroom, don’t talk loudly, don’t be mean etc. The children were surprised that we could simplify their rules into three rules, and had fun placing their rules under one of the three headings. The children also were shocked to find out that Miss. Diana and I had gotten together and had created the same three rules that the children did. It was nice to have all the children’s attention during this lesson and have them being active participants in creating our classroom rules.
Date: Tuesday, September 17th

Lesson: The inner self- a lesson created by Cathleen Haskins found in:


Procedure: Using three matryoshka dolls also know as nesting dolls in a large, medium, and small size, you will have the students look at and understand their outside physical self, their mind and emotions, and their inner self. The students should be active participants in each section of this lesson, talking about and discussing the three layers of themselves.

After lesson notes: Initially the students were very excited to see the nesting dolls, and wanted to share their experiences they had with them from children’s house and from their own homes. Our discussion about the outer physical self was very in-depth even for my group of first graders. They had a long discussion about appearances of people, and how if we were all the same the world would be a boring place. They also made a connection to our read a loud book called Unlikely Friendships, written by Jennifer Holland, and stated even though the animals are all different they could still be friends. This conversation was very moving for me as a teacher. We then moved onto our mind and emotions part of our body, and again I got to listen to a wonderful conversation between the children about who knows this special part of themselves in their own lives. Lastly, we talked about the more abstract idea of the inner self. The children seemed to understand that their inner self was their own sense of power. One student took the idea to the extreme comparing it to a sort of Jedi power he had seen on TV, but I explained to the classroom that this is not a super human power, it is a power that each of them hold
inside themselves. Overall it was a great lesson with powerful discussions among the children.

Date: Wednesday, September 18th


Procedure: In this lesson the children took a deeper look into their inner self, called in this lesson, their love light. They are presented with a mysterious bag, which contains a peaceful person, a person who is sad/angry/scared, and a candle. The lesson explains to the children that they always have a light shining within them. Sometimes their love light it shines bright when the children are happy or excited or are feeling loved, and other times it is dimmer because the child is feeling sad or angry. However, the children learn that they always have a love light and they can always do things to make their love light shine bright again. The students then learn the technique of taking deep slow breathes to relax and help them make their love light shine bright again. At the end of the lessons the children also learn how to make silence and the importance of silence for their inner self.

After lesson notes: This lesson was a great visual for the students to help them understand more fully the power of their inner self also known as their love light. The children responded wonderfully to the demonstration of the light behind the peaceful person shining bright and related to the feeling inside and the dimming of their love light when they felt sad or angry. It was great to see the children going into the peaceful
corner of our classroom that day and even days after to use the special bag to help them feel their love light shine more brightly. It also was a good way to give the children two strategies to help them when they are feeling angry or upset in the classroom.

Date: Thursday, September 19th


Procedure: The children are presented with a special bag containing a beautiful candle and a lighter. The candle is lit and the children are asked what they think this candle represents. The children discuss their love light and the lesson from the day before. The teacher leads the students through how to make silence and leaves the candle in the middle of the circle to remind the students of the love light within them. After making silence, the children end the lesson by singing this little light of mine.

After lesson notes: The children responded excitedly to the candle and remembered a lot of information from the lesson the day before. However, when making silence I had a couple of students interrupt the moment by making silly noises and laughing, which caused others to become distracted during the silence making. I reminded the students how important it is you’re your inner self and love light to make silence each day. I told my students that we will continue to practice making silence, and hopefully each day they will be able to make silence for a longer period of time, and they will be able to give their inner self a time of relaxation and peace.
Date: Friday, September 20th


Procedure: I gathered the children and asked them to close their eyes. I then placed a yellow circle pin on my chest. I asked the children to open their eyes. I then led a discussion with the children about what the yellow circle represented. The children discussed their love light again. I then presented each child with their own love light and told them when they are feeling loved, or happy, or excited in the classroom and would like to show that to the rest of our classroom that they were invited to wear their love light. The children beamed as I called them each by name and placed their love light on them. I collected the love lights and showed the children where they would be placed in our peaceful area, and we then lit our candle and made silence.

After lesson notes: The lesson went great. However, I used paper and tape instead of the suggested felt and safety pin to attach the love lights. This ended up causing a huge distraction because some students began playing with the tape from the back of their love lights. So next time I do this lesson I would definitely use felt and make it a necklace or a pin to have less distraction during the lesson. However, right after the lesson some children went to the peaceful area and placed their love lights on proudly, which was a great thing to see.