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The Effects of a Book Club on Montessori and Parent Education.

An Action Research Report
By: Stevie A. Harrison
The Effects of a Book Club on Montessori and Parent Education

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Abstract

This study was implemented to research the effects of parent education and parents understanding of Montessori, in the form of a parent book club. The aim of this action research project was to improve parents understanding of the basic concepts of the Montessori Method with the goal to persuade parents to keep their students in a Montessori environment as long as possible. This study was conducted in a small private Montessori school. All participants had children that were enrolled in the Montessori school. Data collection was gathered using a pre/post survey, self-assessment surveys, videotaping of the book club sessions, and guided discussion questions. Results suggest that parent education was beneficial regarding parents understanding of the Montessori Method. Results also showed that through parent education parents had more questions about the nuances of education in general after the book club concluded. Through a detailed analysis of the pre and post survey, self-assessment surveys, guided discussion questions, and video recording a secondary result, the creation of community and like-minded individuals, presented itself as a beneficial outcome of parent education. The issue of Montessori students and their transition from a Montessori environment to a traditional educational setting was identified and poses the need for additional research. Overall, findings suggest that as Montessori educators we can strengthen the Montessori movement with the implementation of parent education and additional research.
“One of the great strengths of the United States has long been its relative tolerance for diversity of opinion – its willingness to question its assumptions and to reinvent itself,” (Powell, 2009. p. 18). Differences of opinion, reinvention, and innovation have been happening since the birth of the United States. However, one social area, the Industrial Age system of education, has predominantly remained stagnant since its development. An article from Time Magazine, “How to bring our schools out of the 20th century,” (Wallis, Steptoe, & Miranda, 2006) illustrates a poignant parody regarding the severity of the reluctance to change:

There’s a dark little joke exchanged by educators with a dissident streak: Rip Van Winkle awakens in the 21st century after a hundred year snooze and is, of course, utterly bewildered by what he sees. Men and women dash about, talking to small metal devices pinned to their ears. Young people sit at home on sofas, moving miniature athletes around on electronic screens. Older folk defy death and disability with metronomes in their chests and with hips made of metal and plastic. Airports, hospitals, shopping malls—every place Rip goes just baffles him. But when he finally walks into a schoolroom, the old man knows exactly where he is. “This is a school,” he declares. “We used to have these back in 1906. Only now the blackboards are green.”

This story illustrates a clear message that everything around us has changed rapidly since the 20th century, yet the way we educate our children has remained the same. The Montessori method of education is adaptable, collaborative, constructive, and meets many needs of the 21st century. The ironic twist is that Montessori opened her first classroom in 1907 over one hundred years ago.

As a student that experienced a less then engaging education in the traditional factory model, it has become my mission to redefine the way American students experience education. My curiosity about Montessori and parent education stems through two problems: general public awareness of Montessori, and limited understanding of the
benefits of Montessori regarding the parents who have children enrolled in Montessori schools.

In the Montessori school where I teach, we offer private Montessori education through the upper elementary age group. In the transition from early childhood to the elementary program I have noticed a high attrition rate. The majority of our early childhood students choose an alternative method of education upon completing the early childhood program such as public school or a different private school. Through conversations with my school director, my theory that all of the early childhood classes at our school experience the same problem was confirmed. I hypothesize that this problem stems from a number of things. First, many parents in our area enroll in our toddler program because we are one of the few schools that enroll toddler aged children. Our toddler retention rate remains very high. Secondly, upon completion of the early childhood program parents move their students to a free public school or a different non-Montessori private school. I suspect the problem is that most parents who choose to leave the school for another private school are not seeing or understanding the value of a Montessori education.

Therefore, on a broad scale this study aims to accelerate the reinvention of the current mainstream conceptions of education. Specifically this study targets parents who have children in a private Montessori school. Further this study seeks to educate, highlight, and promote the unique benefits of a Montessori style of education to those parents through a facilitated book club. The book club will be focused on Trevor Eissler’s book, *Montessori Madness*, a book about Montessori written by an author who is not Montessori trained. The hope of this book club is to enrich parents understanding of the
Montessori method resulting in influencing their decision to keep their children in a Montessori environment beyond early childhood.

As I began researching the topic of parent education two main pieces of literature came to fruition for the development of my action research. The first, a facilitated book club regarding parent education and Montessori also using Eissler’s, *Montessori Madness*, presented by Ed Stanford (2013). Stanford (2013) presents an online Prezi highlighting his surveys for collecting data pre and post book club, as well as insight on specific discussion questions aimed at informing parents of the benefits of a Montessori education. The second, a survey developed by Angela Murray (2012), American Montessori Society senior researcher and coordinator. She conducted an online survey to determine how the public perceives Montessori. The online survey included a sample population of approximately 1500 adult panel members. Results supported that 67% of the adults had heard of Montessori, and 33% of adults had never heard of Montessori. Those who had heard of Montessori averaged 64% correct on questions regarding knowledge of Montessori. Murray (2012) discovered most participants answered true or false statements correctly when they were topics that any progressive educational program would hope to achieve like: having hand’s on materials, helping children reach their individual potential, and motivating them to want to learn.

Murray, Eissler, and Benham, found that less intuitive aspects of Montessori are generally misunderstood. The following is a list of Murray’s (2012) survey questions regarding the less intuitive aspects of Montessori. The highlighted questions are what respondents believed to be true about Montessori at least 50% of the time.

- Montessori teachers most often:
See their role as making learning seem like play.
Schedule breaks for the class during work time to rest.
See their role as transferring knowledge to children.
Change activities frequently during the day to keep children interested.
Motivate children by praising good work.

- Children in Montessori classrooms most often:
  - Get small prizes or rewards for good behavior
  - Receive certificates, stickers, or other forms of recognition for encouragement.

- Montessori classrooms most often:
  - Have incentive charts on the wall, recognizing children for good work.
  - Have specialized workbooks.
  - Have multiple sets for each activity so that children do not have to wait for a turn
  - Have areas for pretend play for preschoolers

- Primary goals of Montessori education include:
  - Keeping children on track with classmates at their grade level.
  - Helping children gain a competitive edge in life.

Others like Eissler, Benham, and Chattin-McNichols, describe misconceptions of Montessori as a disorganized, unstructured, and undisciplined environment. Chattin-
McNichols (1998) reports common misunderstandings such as: Montessori is just for special learners, Montessori schools are affiliated with religion, Montessori is only for the rich or the poor, Montessori is too structured, or there are too much or not enough academics (p.9-22).

Other research-based understandings regarding parent education in a more general sense, suggest (Grothaus, Hoover-Dempsey and Sanders, Kay and Fitzgerald, Burch and Palanki) that parental involvement in the education of their student promotes academic success. Aligning and building upon this research I hope to prove that getting parents involved in the education of their students by teaching them about the benefits of Montessori will help promote students academic success by influencing the decision of parents to keep them in a Montessori environment. Hoover-Dempsey and Sanders highlight three features that motivate parents to make a decision to participate in school involvement (such as a parent book club): parents’ role construction, parents’ sense of efficacy for helping their children, and general invitations, demands, and opportunities for involvement (1997, p. 3). These features suggest a need for an action research based project that invites parents to be responsible for understanding the educational choices available, specifically the Montessori education they have chosen for their child.

The attrition problem at my school and research on the topic of public perceptions of Montessori and parent education serve as a foundation for addressing the research questions:

1. Using Eissler’s book, *Montessori Madness*, what effects will a parent book club have regarding a parent’s knowledge of the Montessori Method?

2. Will an increased understanding of the Montessori Method influence the
decision making process of a parent to keep their child in a Montessori environment beyond early childhood? (The majority of families with early childhood students choose an alternative method of education upon completing the early childhood program.)

Description of the Research Process

When conducting my research I will implement four methods of data collection: an online pre and post survey, adapted from Angela Murray’s (2012) original survey entitled, *Public Knowledge of Montessori*, a self-assessment survey, a video recording of each book club session, and guided discussion questions. The research will be conducted over a period of six weeks. The format of the book club will be to have participants read selected chapters from the book and meet on three separate occasions spaced out over the six weeks to discuss Eissler’s (2009) book, *Montessori Madness*. The goal of this action research project is to improve parents understanding of the basic concepts of the Montessori Method with the aim to persuade parents to keep their students in a Montessori environment as long as possible. The book club sessions will be held in the upper elementary classroom to emphasize the exciting curriculum of the six to nine year olds at our school.

I have discussed my research problem and method with my school director and I have been approved to begin research in the spring of 2014. I have designed an email explaining my background as an action researcher and I will extend an invitation to all parents of our school to join the book club. When I send the email, the school population shall consist of: one infant toddler class, two toddler classes, three early childhood classes, one lower elementary class, and one upper elementary class, approximately 140
students and 280 parents. The director will send the email to all the parents of our school with the proposed deadline for parents to sign up.

Out of the 280 parents that will be notified I predict ten percent of the parent population will enroll. I have created a Google Form with the times and dates that I will be available to host and will submit it to the book club members to determine the best time for the majority of the group. I assume not all participants will be able to attend at the same time and most likely I will lose some participants. As I begin planning for the book club I will send an email with a link on where to purchase the book, a link to the pre book club survey (see Appendix C), and the first reading assignment from the book.

The purpose of the pre book club survey is to determine baseline data on how well the participants understand the Montessori philosophy. The survey is designed around nine categories: (1) what schools in America should be doing, (2) what schools in America are doing well, (3) how knowledgeable participants are of Montessori, (4) jobs of Montessori teachers, (5) jobs of Montessori children, (6) the Montessori classroom, (7) primary goals of Montessori education, (8) what Montessori education does well, and finally (9) how likely the participant is to keep their student in a Montessori based setting beyond the early childhood program?

During the first session participants will read chapters 1 through chapter 10. The chapters we will focus on are: chapter 5 - A Home. A School, chapter 7 - The Sensitive Periods, chapter 8 -The Absorbent Mind, chapter 9 - The Prepared Environment, and chapter 10 - Rewards. The discussion questions for the first session will include (appendix C):

1. Have you had the opportunity to observe a working Montessori classroom? What did you notice? (chp. 5)
2. After reading the chapter, “The Sensitive Periods,” what does a sensitive period mean to you? (chp. 7)

3. How does the absorbent mind relate to sensitive periods? Can you identify this relationship in experiences with your own child? (chp. 8)

4. Why is a prepared environment so important in a Montessori classroom? (chp. 9)

5. After reading the chapter about rewards, what are your thoughts? Do you identify and agree with what Montessori teaches, why or why not?

The discussion questions are aimed at educating parents on the questions presented in the survey taken before the first session.

During the first book club session, I will carefully prepare the environment of the upper elementary classroom. I want to set the scene of a Montessori classroom: peaceful, gracious, organized, and well prepared. A traditional Montessori classroom hosts group lessons and Socratic discussions around a large circular rug. I will organize the seating around the circle rug in an effort to incorporate what a working classroom looks like when children are engaged in group discussion. I will provide nametags, pens, and clipboards for the self-assessment surveys at the end of the book club. The self-assessment survey will include the questions (appendix B):

1. As a result of participating in this book club, what have you learned about Montessori?
2. After participating in this book club, do you feel you understand Montessori better, have more questions, or understand Montessori just as you did before you began the book club?
3. Has participating in the book club changed your perceptions regarding Montessori?
4. Has participating in the book club influenced your decision to keep your child in a Montessori program beyond kindergarten?
5. What activities during the book club have been most helpful to you?

The purpose of the self-assessment survey is to see if the participants have changed their opinions of the provided questions from session to session.
Finally, I will provide a spread of refreshments including: water, sparkling apple cider, vegetables and hummus, cheese and crackers, and some homemade brownies. I will also have soft music from the music service Pandora playing in the background. Once all of the participants have arrived I will begin by introducing myself, my action research, and present the information and consent form (see Appendix D). I will brief the participants on my data collection sources and will obtain written consent to videotape our session. The students and teachers of a typical Montessori classroom use a peace object to introduce guests or facilitate conflict resolution. I plan to begin the book club by using a peace object to introduce participants and ask them to offer why they are interested in the book club. These introductions will serve as the premise to get the conversation moving. The discussions will be guided by the planned discussion questions (see Appendix C) as well as topics that the participants feel are relevant and important. I will conclude the evening by having participants fill out the self-assessment survey (see Appendix B).

Upon completion of the first book club, I plan to send an email thanking participants for supporting my research and the assigned reading for session two. The participants will be given two weeks to read chapters eleven through fifteen. The second book club will be facilitated in the same manner as the first one. We will follow the discussion questions prepared for session two as well as other topics that participants feel are relevant and important. Discussion questions for session two will include:

1. What are your thoughts on competition vs. teamwork? (chp. 11)
2. Considering Montessori’s idea of minimizing punishment by facilitating choices, do you have questions about the importance of a prepared environment? (chp. 12)
3. Concentration is reached through meaningful work and consistent guidelines. Do you understand how concentration is facilitated at school, can you facilitate something similar in your home environment? (chp. 13)
4. When contemplating Montessori’s definition of concentration and discipline do you understand the relationship between a consistent routine and the environment? (chp. 14)

5. At what age do you think it is important for children to learn responsibility? Do you agree with Montessori’s views on responsibility? (chp. 15)

I will conclude the evening with the second self-assessment survey.

Again, the day after session two, I will send an email thanking participants for supporting my research and with the final reading assignments chapters sixteen through twenty. We will meet for our third and final book club and continue by following the discussion questions for session three and other topics that the participants feel are relevant and important. The planned discussion questions for session three are:

1. With responsibility comes freedom. In a Montessori children are respected the same way adults are respected. They are allowed to make their own decisions as long as no one else is harmed. Do you agree or disagree with Montessori’s philosophy regarding freedom? (chp. 16)

2. My experiences in school led me to believe I shouldn’t make mistakes, but try to give the answer the teacher thought was correct. How do you feel about Montessori’s ideas of being comfortable with error? (chp. 17, 18, 19)

3. Teachers can only attempt to offer favorable conditions for a child to learn. Do you agree with Montessori’s philosophy that learning is a natural process that develops from within the child. How does this philosophy differ from a traditional method of teaching? (chp. 20)

I will follow up our last meeting with an email reminding participants to take the post book club survey.

Analysis of Data

After gaining approval for the data collection sources I submitted a plan to the head of school for the proposed schedule of the book club and my research start date was approved for the spring of the 2013-2014 school year. Out of the 280 parents notified about my research, ten participants joined the book club. After adjusting the meeting
schedule for the majority, three participants were lost due to conflict of time, leaving seven participants for the book club.

The head of school approved the data collection sources including: the survey, the self-assessment survey, and the guided discussion questions, and videotaping the book club sessions. All but one of the participants took the pre survey before the book club began and after all three sessions concluded. Discussion questions were used to guide the conversation of the book club with the hope of connecting the information on the survey with the content of the book. The self-assessment surveys were administered at the end of each book club meeting to help me gain an understanding of the overall success of the book club and the goal of answering the research question.

Upon completion of the book club I sent a reminder to participants to complete the post book club survey. Following the reminder, I encountered some trouble with the survey platform, Survey Monkey. The survey was not setup to take duplicate surveys from the same IP address. I fixed the settings of the survey, apologized to the participants for the inconvenience, and asked them to please take the survey one final time.

The survey collected data in nine categories: (1) what schools in America should be doing, (2) what schools in America are doing well, (3) how knowledgeable participants are of Montessori, (4) jobs of Montessori teachers, (5) jobs of Montessori children, (6) the Montessori classroom, (7) primary goals of Montessori education, (8) what Montessori education does well, and finally (9) how likely the participant is to keep their student in a Montessori based setting beyond the early childhood program? The following is a summary of the pre-book club and post-book club survey results and how
the discussion questions and self-assessment surveys may have changed participants' perceptions through the course of the book club.

The pre-book club survey regarding parent’s knowledge of Montessori was the first data collected. The first section of the survey collected the IP address and anonymous coded names of the participants. The second (Figure 1) and third sections (Figure 2) of the survey were centered on parent’s general understanding of schools in America. Participants were asked to agree or disagree with statements regarding the goals of America’s schools and agree or disagree on statements about what schools in America are doing well.

Figure 1 shows before the book club most parents felt strongly that schools in America motivate children to want to learn, encourage creative thinking, provide a sense of community, give children a competitive edge in life, and facilitate cooperation. These results are contradicting with Eissler’s (2003) book, *Montessori Madness*, and the commonly accepted opinion that traditional schools do not provide children with an engaging environment. It is becoming ever more prevalent that traditional schools are based on the factory model designed in the industrial era and held accountable through the use of standardized tests and do not meet the needs of the 21st century. These results highlight the need to demonstrate (through the guided discussion questions) how the Montessori Method is designed as a holistic approach to education accommodating the need for: cooperation, intrinsic motivation, a love of learning, and providing a rich community for students to polish their social skills. Many of these holistic experiences would not be as rich if they were forced to unfold within the scaffolding of a test-based curriculum, the hallmark of a traditional educational based system.
The change in question three (Figure 1), shows that before the book club 50% of participants had a definite opinion for or against schools focusing more on academic skills than social skills. After the book club over 50% were unsure whether schools in America should focus more on academic skills than social skills. During the first book club session I asked the question, “After reading the chapter, *The Sensitive Periods*, what does a sensitive period mean to you?” On the topic of sensitive periods, a lively discussion began on blended ages, class sizes, and various rates at which children learn, as well as the transition from a Montessori setting to a traditional education setting. It is my opinion that conversations such as this may have contributed to this change. Participants appreciated the positive conflict resolution setting (social skills) that a Montessori education provides but were anxious over the transition of their student to a more traditional school where a conflict resolution plan may or may not be in place.

*Figure 1.* In general schools in America should...
Question four (Figure 1) notes, before the book club 50% of participants disagreed that schools should be judged primarily by standardized tests and 50% were unsure. After the book club 83% disagreed that schools should be judged based on standardized tests. As the book club meetings progressed there were many discussions about freedom of choice and sensitive periods. When I asked the discussion question, “With responsibility comes freedom. In a Montessori school children are respected the same way adults are respected. They are allowed to make their own decisions as long as no one else is harmed. Do you agree or disagree with Montessori’s philosophy regarding freedom,” participants agreed that freedom of choice and teachers following the learning needs of students are beneficial and make learning enjoyable. It is my belief that our group conversations on freedom of choice led the group to have an altered opinion on standardized testing. When a teacher’s job is in jeopardy because they are held accountable by the scores students receive on a test it is less likely that a teacher will allow children choice about what they learn.

Figure 2. In general schools in America do a good job...

*See Appendix A for detailed questions.
Section three (Figure 2) of the survey seeks more in depth responses from participants about what schools in America are doing well. Prior to the book club participants had scattered opinions about what schools in America are doing well. Once the book club concluded there was not much significant change of participant’s opinions in most categories. Question three (Figure 2) regarding, “If schools in America meet the needs of highly intelligent children,” changed from the majority of 67% of the participants undecided to 67% disagreeing that schools in America do not meet the needs of highly intelligent children. Many conversations were documented throughout the book club meetings about the importance of an individualized education. An individualized education accommodates for children who are gifted and children with learning disabilities. One participant said, “I think from what I know about education and reading about the sensitive periods that what I understand is that people learn things much faster, retain things much longer, and understand them much deeper when they learn them at the time they are ready.” The traditional education system organizes children by age and the time a child is ready to learn varies from child to child therefore a system organized by age doesn’t accommodate for the children who are ready sooner or need more time to learn.

Question twelve (Figure 2) demonstrated a change in participant’s opinions regarding whether schools in general do a good job teaching children to be respectful of others. Before the book club 50% of participants agreed schools in general do a good job teaching children how to be respectful of others. After the book club 67% of participants were undecided whether or not schools do a good job teaching respect. During all three sessions of the book club conflict resolution was a topic of conversation. I speculate that
because participants were informed about how Montessori schools handle conflict resolution and employ Maria Montessori’s peace curriculum, it left them wondering if traditional schools can offer the same experience.

The remainder of the survey focused on questions that were directly related to what parents know about Montessori. Figure 3 depicts participant’s opinions on how knowledgeable they felt they were regarding Montessori education before and after the book club. Originally, all participants felt moderately or very knowledgeable regarding Montessori education. Following the book club most participants felt moderately or slightly knowledgeable about Montessori education. This data suggests that over the course of the book club as we explored and juxtaposed the nuances of Montessori and traditional education participants realized in general they had more questions about education leaving them feeling less knowledgeable than they originally thought.

In order to gain a more clear understanding of what parents viewed as the role of the Montessori teacher, Figure 4 represents the answers to the question about what Montessori teachers most often do. The results of these questions (Figure 4) highlighted
that parents had a basic belief of the role of the Montessori teacher before the book club began. Questions five and eight (Figure 4) showed the most significant differences. Question five showed that before the book club 50% of participants disagreed that Montessori teachers saw their role as making learning seem like play. After the book club 50% agreed that Montessori teachers view their role as making learning seem like play. Montessori believed that children liked to contribute and participate in real life activities. This data suggests that I may have misled the participants about Montessori and the role of play. During our second discussion, I said that, “Montessori is a lot like purposeful play.” This message could have easily been interpreted as teachers see their role as making learning seem like play. A more accurate statement would be that, “Montessori teachers like learning to be fun and engaging.”

Originally, question eight was divided into thirds, 1/3 agreed, 1/3 did not know, and 1/3 disagreed that Montessori teachers change activities frequently during the day to keep children interested. After the book club the group was divided in half 50% agreed and 50% disagreed. The data from this section suggests that participants are a little confused when asked to define the nuances of the role of the Montessori teacher.
The true or false section (Figure 5) regarding children in the classroom revealed that parents knew more about what their students do in the classroom than I originally thought and their opinions mostly remained the same upon completion of the book club. Parents believed to be true: children choose their work, work at their own pace, are allowed to work together in groups, and have large periods of time to do their work. They believed to be false: children receive certificates and small prizes for good work and behavior, and that they are expected to do their work alone without help from peers. The most variance was in the question regarding if children have to sit quietly while doing their work. One participant thought true, one participant thought false and the other three were unsure. I have drawn the conclusion that some of our discussion on the ground rules of the classroom may have led participants to be confused about this question. During session two of the book club I asked the question, “When contemplating Montessori’s definition of concentration and discipline do you understand the relationship between a consistent routine and the environment?” As a group we discussed that a consistent routine meant following the ground rules of the classroom. The discussion of ground
rules led to the actual rules, one of the classroom rules is that students are allowed to choose whatever they want to work on as long as they don’t disrupt the other children in the classroom who are working. This conversation could have easily been misinterpreted to mean that children have to sit quietly while doing their work.

When participants answered questions regarding the classroom (Figure 6) I was not surprised by the results. Parents knew that Montessori classrooms have hands on materials, and materials for educating the senses, which are features that any progressive style education might incorporate. They also knew unanimously that the environment does not have multiple sets of work, or incentive charts on the wall. The confusion was at the crossroads of pretend play and productive work. Some participants were unsure if the Montessori environment supports pretend play. Clearly, these parents have looked around their children’s classrooms and have a very good understanding of the physical classroom.
Figure 7 documents participant’s opinions about the goals of Montessori education. Participants agreed that the goals of Montessori education should in fact be the goals it seeks to provide; a well rounded education that meets the needs of the 21st century including: collaboration, social skills, and academics. The only area where misunderstanding existed was concerning question eight, “helping children gain a competitive edge in life.” 67% of participants were still unsure if gaining a competitive edge in life should be a goal of Montessori education. These opinions most likely stem from a conversation during the second session of our book club. I asked the question, “What are your thoughts on competition vs. teamwork,” and a lively debate ensued. Although some participants thought that competition was healthy when it came to sports we also discussed the drawbacks of competition in the traditional sense of education and how it can make some children feel alienated. An interesting paradox arises with this information. Participants want their children to respect others, work together productively, yet in an economic driven society they also see the need to give their children a competitive edge in life, posing further research on the priority levels parents set for their children.
Figure 8 represents findings on what participants think Montessori schools do well. The results were fairly unanimous and demonstrated that parents believe the specific Montessori school their children are enrolled in do a great job educating their children. Considering that this research project was conducted in a small close-knit private school community these results are not surprising. Many or all of the participants are well educated, entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, and socialites. The discussion question from the first session, “Have you had the opportunity to observe a working Montessori classroom? What did you notice?” revealed that all of the participants have done their research on existing schools and feel they have made an educated choice when it comes to the school for their children.
On the final question (Figure 9), over half of the respondents said they were likely or very likely to keep their child in a Montessori environment beyond early childhood before the book club. However, after the book club the results varied. 50% of the participants were left undecided. Through careful review of the videotaped sessions and self-assessment surveys it became clear that participants are very concerned about the transition from a private Montessori school to another form of traditional private school or public school. By synthesizing the results of the survey data, self-assessments, discussion questions, and videotaped discussions, it is my understanding that the value of Montessori was understood and appreciated by all participants. However, the value of the Montessori education did not surpass the obstacles that parents believe their children will face once graduating from a Montessori school. Participants were also concerned about the size of the classes at this particular school. As the students get older, the size of the classes gets smaller leaving less of an educational experience. Participants voiced concerns about the social needs of their students and the problem that the smaller class size presents regarding this social dynamic. When contemplating the goal of the research
question, to improve parents understanding on the basic concepts of the Montessori Method in an effort to persuade them to keep their students in a Montessori environment as long as possible, it became clear that their overall understanding of Montessori was enhanced. A side effect of this goal is that a secondary issue was also identified, the transition from a Montessori environment into a traditionally based educational environment.

![Figure 9](image-url)  
*Figure 9. Based on what you know or have learned about Montessori education, how likely are you to keep your child in a Montessori environment beyond early childhood?*

**Action Plan**

A thorough analysis of the data indicates: what participants gained from the book club, suggests possible methods to change current education practices, highlights the potential for raising the bar on education for all students, and poses further questions for future research. Overall participants gained more knowledge about the basics of the Montessori philosophy. The analysis also showed that because participants became more informed they also became more curious. Further, participants also gained a strong sense of community. This community provided what Hoover-Dempsey and Sanders highlighted in their research as, the three features that motivate parents to make a decision to
participate in school involvement including: parents’ role construction (participants felt like their participation in the book club is something a caring and responsible parent should do), parents’ sense of efficacy for helping their children (confirming they have chosen a positive educational environment for their children), and general invitations, demands, and opportunities for involvement (fulfilling their need to be social in an educational context) (1997, p. 3). In general, people want to feel like they belong, so the sheer fact that the feeling of community was created helps parents feel more connected which can certainly impact retention. Once concluded, the book club participants were so enthused about connecting with each other and what they had learned it was collectively decided to continue a new session and a new book by, Dr. Jane Nelsen (1996), *Positive Discipline*.

On a large scale teachers are held accountable for students learning through the use of standardized tests. After the book club most participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that schools should be judged by success on standardized testing. This data suggests that on a broad scale the book club was able to educate parents more about the issues that standardized testing can create for any type of education system; a victory for educating parents about the controversies of education in general. This data suggests a possible avenue to creating change in today’s standard education practices it is my hope that this change is also oriented towards the Montessori philosophy of education and educating the whole child.

One way to raise the bar on students learning when considering Montessori education is to make parent education programs a mandatory part of school policies. If programs like this one are mandatory, the potential for increased parent education will
positively increase student learning simply by keeping children in a Montessori environment beyond the early childhood program.

This action research project also serves as a reminder that the implications of not reaching out to parents include parents continuing to have the perception that Montessori is not a viable alternative for the long run. Currently, many Montessori elementary programs are stereotyped as meeting the needs of children with learning disabilities or the highly gifted. It is my hope that with greater parent education regarding the Montessori Method, more parents will want to keep their children in a Montessori environment creating a demand for Montessori in the elementary years and larger class sizes that will accommodate for the social needs of children in the 6-12 year age span.

Although the sample size of the participants was quite small a clear message was received. Parents are extremely concerned about their students transitioning from Montessori to traditional based education. This problem suggests the need for more research to identify the actual impact of this transition. Once identified, Montessorians can address the transition problem more accurately or have solid proof that this transition is indeed not a problem.

It is my belief that through the medium of parent education, as a nation we can elevate the bar of student learning within our country. As an educator trying to answer, how to improve the current educational climate, this research shows that the need for parent education is not just in small private school communities but a call for parent education programs to the general public. As Montessorians we must continue to research and publish our results to build a strong case about why Montessori is one of the answers to a 21st century education.
References


Appendix A – Pre and Post Survey

Montessori Knowledge

Coded Identification

*1. Anonymous Coded Name

Please use the make, model, and color of your first car. (Ex. Subaru, Legacy, Silvery)

General attitudes toward education.

First, please share about your opinions regarding schools in America in general.

2. In general schools in America should...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>help children learn to cooperate with one another.</td>
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<td>give children a competitive edge in life.</td>
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<td>focus more on academic skills than social skills.</td>
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<td>be judged primarily by success on standardized tests.</td>
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<td>encourage creative thinking.</td>
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<td>motivate children to want to learn.</td>
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</table>
### Montessori Knowledge

3. In general schools in America do a good job...

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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
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<th>Disagree</th>
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<th>Agree</th>
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<td>developing children's problem-solving skills.</td>
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<td>developing children's math skills.</td>
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<td>developing children's reading skills.</td>
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<td>helping children learn to be responsible people.</td>
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<td>helping children learn how to learn.</td>
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</table>

### General Montessori Knowledge

Please indicate your level of agreement for each of the following statements based on whatever you know or have learned about Montessori education.
4. How knowledgeable are you about Montessori education?

- Extremely knowledgeable
- Very knowledgeable
- Moderately knowledgeable
- Slightly knowledgeable
- Not at all knowledgeable

5. Montessori teachers most often...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Do not know</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>see their role as transferring knowledge to children.</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>evaluate children’s learning by giving students tests based on the curriculum.</td>
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<td>change activities frequently during the day to keep the children interested.</td>
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<td>see their role as making learning seem like play.</td>
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<td>keep detailed records on individual student’s progress in the curriculum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>motivate children by praising good work.</td>
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<td>schedule breaks for the class during work time to rest.</td>
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<td>teach lessons for the entire class so everyone gets the information at the same time.</td>
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<td>view learning as developing from within the child based on his/her experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>motivate children through following the children’s interests.</td>
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<tr>
<td>evaluate children’s learning by observing the children’s work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>are more concerned with the children’s understanding concepts than correct answers.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Montessori Knowledge

#### 6. Children in Montessori classes most often...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Receive certificates, stickers, or other forms of recognition for encouragement.</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
<th>Do not know.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are allowed to work together in small groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Get small prizes or rewards for good behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decide what they want to work on each day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are expected to sit quietly while doing their work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are expected to do their own work without help from classmates.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have a large block of time to work without interruptions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work at their own pace.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### 7. Montessori classrooms most often...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have hands-on materials for learning.</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
<th>Do not know.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Display papers with the highest grades on the bulletin board in elementary classes to showcase the best work.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Include children of mixed ages.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have areas for pretend play for preschoolers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have activities for preschoolers for educating the senses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have multiple sets for each activity so that children do not have to wait for a turn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have incentive charts on the wall recognizing children for good work.</td>
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</table>
8. Primary goals of Montessori education include...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Do not know</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>helping children develop the ability to concentrate.</td>
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<td>teaching children to be respectful to others.</td>
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<td>teaching children to value high grades.</td>
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<td>helping children to reach their individual potential.</td>
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<tr>
<td>keeping children on track with classmates at their grade level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>developing children's self discipline.</td>
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<tr>
<td>developing children's sense of community at school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>helping children gain a competitive edge in life.</td>
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<td>motivating children to want to learn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>providing an orderly learning environment.</td>
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<td>helping children become independent people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>teaching children to rely on the teacher's feedback to know how they are doing on their work.</td>
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</table>
9. Montessori schools do a good job...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
10. Based on what you know or have learned about Montessori education, how likely are you to keep your child in a Montessori environment beyond early childhood?

- [ ] Not likely
- [ ] Likely
- [ ] Very Likely
- [ ] Undecided

Why or why not?
Appendix B – Self-Assessment Survey

Self-Assessment Survey

1. As a result of participating in this book club, what have you learned about Montessori?

2. After participating in this book club, do you feel you understand Montessori better, have more questions, or understand Montessori just as you did before you began the book club?

   (Circle one)  Better  Worse  Same

   Why?

3. Has participating in the book club changed your perceptions regarding Montessori?
   (Circle one)  Yes  No

   How?

4. Has participating in the book club influenced your decision to keep your child in a Montessori program beyond kindergarten?
   (Circle one)  Yes  No

   Why?

5. What activities during the book club have been most helpful to you?
Appendix C – Guided Discussion Questions

SESSION 1 (6:30-8:00pm)
Focus on chapters: 5, 7, 8, 9, & 10.

Questions
6. Have you had the opportunity to observe a working Montessori classroom? What did you notice? (chp. 5)
7. After reading the chapter, “The Sensitive Periods,” what does a sensitive period mean to you? (chp. 7)
8. How does the absorbent mind relate to sensitive periods? Can you identify this relationship in experiences with your own child? (chp. 8)
9. Why is a prepared environment so important in a Montessori classroom? (chp. 9)
10. After reading the chapter about rewards, what are your thoughts? Do you identify and agree with what Montessori teaches, why or why not?

SESSION 2 (6:30-8:00pm)
Focus on chapters: 11-15.

Questions
6. What are your thoughts on competition vs. teamwork? (chp. 11)
7. Considering Montessori’s idea of minimizing punishment by facilitating choices, do you have questions about the importance of a prepared environment? (chp. 12)
8. Concentration is reached through meaningful work and consistent guidelines. Do you understand how concentration is facilitated at school, can you facilitate something similar in your home environment? (chp. 13)
9. When contemplating Montessori’s definition of concentration and discipline do you understand the relationship between a consistent routine and the environment? (chp. 14)
10. At what age do you think it is important for children to learn responsibility? Do you agree with Montessori’s views on responsibility? (chp. 15)

SESSION 3 (6:30-8:00pm)
Focus on chapters: 16-20.

Questions
4. With responsibility comes freedom. In a Montessori children are respected the same way adults are respected. They are allowed to make their own decisions as long as no one else is harmed. Do you agree or disagree with Montessori’s philosophy regarding freedom? (chp. 16)
5. My experiences in school led me to believe I shouldn’t make mistakes, but try to give the answer the teacher thought was correct. How do you feel about Montessori’s ideas of being comfortable with error? (chp. 17, 18, 19)
6. Teachers can only attempt to offer favorable conditions for a child to learn. Do you agree with Montessori’s philosophy that learning is a natural process that
develops from within the child. How does this philosophy differ from a traditional method of teaching? (chp. 20)
Appendix D – Information and Consent Form

Action Research – Parent Education
Information and Consent Form

Introduction:
You are invited to participate in a research study investigating parent education and Montessori. This study is being conducted by Stevie Harrison, a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Amanda Perna, a faculty advisor in the Department of Education. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you are parents of children enrolled in a Montessori school. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to learn about parent’s knowledge of Montessori. The book club will meet three times over the course of six weeks. Approximately 10-12 people are expected to participate in this research.

Procedures:
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an anonymous pre and post survey that will be available online. The survey should take no longer than ten minutes. During the book club I will have a video recording and I will use this information to analyze the effectiveness of the book club. I will also ask specific questions from the book in order to generate conversation about the topics in the book. This study will take approximately six weeks. Book club sessions will meet for 1.5 hours once every two weeks for a total of three sessions and equal 4.5 hours of time.

Risks and Benefits of being in the study:
The study has no anticipated risks.

The benefits to participation include meeting new people and learning more about Montessori.

Confidentiality:
Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented. No one at Soaring Wings will know your results.

When I am done, my work will be electronically available online at the St. Kate’s library in a system called Sophia, which holds published reports written by faculty and graduate students at St. Kate’s. The goal of sharing my final research study report is to help other teachers who are also trying to improve their parent education practices.

I will keep the research results in a locked file cabinet in my home and only I and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by March 26th, 2014. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you including the video recordings.
Voluntary nature of the study:
Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Soaring Wings or St. Catherine University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

New Information:
If during course of this research study I learn about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, I will inform you of these findings.

Contacts and questions:
If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Stevie Harrison, at 435-729-9008. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Amanda Perna, amperna@stkate.edu, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:
You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

I consent to participate in the study and I agree to be videotaped.

___________________________________________
Signature of Participant                      Date

___________________________________________
Signature of Researcher                      Date