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Effective Teacher Communication as a Bridge Between School and Home

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An Action Research Report
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Abstract

This action research study investigated the effects of teacher communication on parent knowledge of the work their child does in the classroom. Forms of teacher communication utilized were parent education events and bi-weekly classroom news. The study was conducted at a small, private Montessori school, and a total of 22 parents participated. Data was collected via pre-information and post-information question sheets, interviews, and education event feedback forms. Parents expressed positive comments regarding the education events and were appreciative of the enhanced understanding of their child's work in the classroom. The bi-weekly classroom news was also well received, however, complication in accessing the blog entries reduced the number of participants significantly. I will continue to use the format for the parent education events in the future and will investigate how to distribute the bi-weekly communications more effectively. Overall, this study validated the importance of parent-teacher communication.

Keywords: communication, parent education

One of the challenges of parenthood is interpreting what your child shares regarding their school day. The child and the teacher are two main sources conveying this information to a parent. As both a parent and teacher, exploring how to assist parents in understanding the experiences of their child at school was of the utmost importance to me. While teaching at a small, private Montessori school, my observations of interactions between staff and parents, as well as my experience of communication methods between staff and parents, led me to researching the most effective methods for parent teacher communications.

Each day, school staff walk children to and from their vehicles at arrival and pickup times. Most days, one or more parents walk a child into their classroom later than the typical arrival time. A brief time for communication with reference to their children is possible either at the vehicle or in the classroom. Parents often pose questions to school staff about general child development or specific academics. The school has several methods in place for more in depth communication with parents. These include parent-teacher conferences, quarterly parent talks, monthly newsletters, and school-wide reminders. However, the recurring questions arising from parents in these brief conversation moments with school staff suggest another communication approach is necessary.

Parents want to understand what skill a particular Montessori material taught the child, how often the child might use the material, and whether the material served only a single purpose. Parents also ask questions about their child's development in areas beyond education, namely, their social interactions both inside and outside of the classroom. They ask questions about how their children interacted with peers, when a

child chose independent versus interactive work, and how to interpret what their child was telling them when they spoke about a particular Montessori material. These issues could not be answered in the brief conversations, and it appears that the parent-teacher conferences and quarterly parent talks already in place were not answering parent questions effectively.

I wondered if the implementation of more parent education on Montessori's attitude toward children and their development, as well as on unique Montessori materials and their utilization in the classroom would be helpful to families. Many parents had no previous Montessori educational background, hence effective methods were needed to impart easily comprehensible information on Montessori's particular approach. The goal was to assist parent's understanding of their child's work in the classroom by focusing on the Montessori materials and to find the most effective methods for achieving this.

Therefore, since it appeared that regularly used methods of communication were proving to be inadequate in addressing parents' need for specific information on the Montessori curriculum, new strategies, focusing on the Montessori materials, were implemented during this research project to communicate Montessori philosophy and pedagogy. Data was then collected to determine the effectiveness of these new strategies. The research study took place in a small, private Montessori school. Parents and teachers of students from both primary (ages 3-6) and elementary (ages 6-12) classrooms participated in the study. The research data collection period spanned an eight-weeks. The literature was reviewed for research on viable methods to enhance communication between parents and the school.

Literature Review

Introduction

Research into the literature revealed that a lack of parent understanding regarding developmental needs of children at particular stages of life can affect the questions and concerns expressed to the staff of Montessori schools. As Joyce (2014) discussed, parents today are anxious, often did not attend a Montessori school, and want to provide the best educational opportunities for their child.   Since parents seek involvement and understanding, parent education is an essential role of a Montessori teacher and school (Lillard, 2005; Joyce, 2014). Parent education for a Montessori school is unique because Montessori education strives to cultivate independence in children (Lillard, 2005). In order to cultivate independence in children, the methods used in a Montessori classroom vary from those used in a traditional classroom. For example Montessori classrooms foster work choice, freedom to move, and predominantly individual and small group lessons. Since the teacher is usually highly trained in the philosophy and implementation of Montessori pedagogy, the teacher becomes an essential part in addressing parent questions and concerns. Teacher-parent communications that are frequent, respectful, and encourage parent involvement aid in the success of the student in the classroom (Moore, 2000). The importance of parent-teacher communication, strategies for effective parent communication and education, and obstacles to be considered will be reviewed.

Positive Outcomes of Communication and Education

There are many positive outcomes to effective communication between parents and teachers. Epstein (1995) and Lazar and Slostad (1999) recognized that a student's success in life as well as in school is enhanced by effective partnerships built between the

school and home. Simmons (2002) surmised that parents and teachers working together

collaboratively reduced both the number of issues occurring with students in the

classroom as well as the length of the duration of issues. Pomerantz, Moorman, and

Litwack (2007) indicated that a parent's involvement with the school motivates a student

by showing the student the value of academics. Graham-Clay (2005) recommended

several techniques of communication for teachers to ensure the opportunity to reach

parents. Of the techniques chosen, face-to-face human interaction as well as careful,

thoughtful planning should be included in order to be more effective (Graham-Clay,

2005).

Effective Parent Education

        Schaefer (1991) wrote an article suggesting that understanding the role of a parent

in educating his/her child would guide the development of a successful parent education

program. A parent education program that was launched in Hong Kong and Greater

China and developed by Lau and Yau did just that. Through observations of children

attending the Montessori school and discussing concerns with parents, Lau and Yau

(2015) revealed a lack of parent understanding regarding their child's developmental

needs.

        Lau and Yau (2015) developed a program that included: Socratic dialogue for

parents held in the Montessori classroom, presentations for parents, observations of

children in the Montessori classroom, and observations of material usage by the children.

The Socratic dialogue was led by a facilitator and allowed for parents to read, hear, and

discuss thoughts and ideas regarding child development and education with other peers.

Following the dialogue phase of parent education, parents were placed in Montessori

classrooms to observe the children and have conversations with instructors and/or

experienced observers about what they saw. Lau and Yau (2015) concluded that the key

to the success of the program was a balance of intellectual discussions and critical

analysis of ideas (theoretical / thoughts) and observations of real world implementation

by a trained Montessori instructor using concrete examples (implementation of the theory

/ actions).

Thaman (1998) completed a study of parent education and involvement at one

elementary school to determine whether parents regarded these programs as productive,

whether parents believed participation in these programs improved student academic

achievement, and to solicit reasons that parents participated in such programs. The

school study completed by Thaman (1998), summarized parent education programs as

effective when program length is between 60 and 90 minutes, children and parents work

together during a portion of the program, parents provide feedback on content of the

program, the program teaches what the children are learning in school, and the program

teaches skills for parents to use with their child. Parents in Thaman's study responded

that parent education was effective when it increased their ability to work with their

child. Schaefer (1991) also found that improving a parent's proficiency in understanding

and working with their child allowed for increased motivation and student success.

Thaman (1998) indicated that since his study was limited to one school, there was a need

for continued parent education program studies.

Recently, a study of three Massachusetts Montessori schools was conducted by

Hiles (2015). Results of Hiles's (2015) study revealed that parents surveyed expected the

children to be learning independently and working at their own pace. Parents also felt

that the teachers should be structuring the child's day and presenting curriculum, and children should be keeping pace with peers in the classroom. Hiles (2015) relayed that working at one's own pace was an important Montessori philosophy, and keeping in pace with peers was counter to that Montessori philosophy. Another significant result was the lack of understanding of the Montessori materials themselves, especially the child's exposure to a concept through multiple approaches (Hiles, 2015). The study conducted by Hiles (2015) suggested parents would benefit from a clearer, more tangible understanding of the Montessori materials in the classroom.

The Riley Institute at Furman University (2015) is conducting an on-going five-year project, during which public Montessori schools in South Carolina are being studied. The complete results of the study will not be available until 2017. Data that has been collected and shared by the schools has indicated that the two most popular topics of parent education are Montessori materials and Montessori philosophy (The Riley Institute, 2015).

Effective Parent Communication

Parent communication methods discussed by Graham-Clay (2005) include one-way communication, two-way communication, and communication through technology. One-way communication refers to written forms of parent-teacher communication such as newsletters, school-to-home notebooks, report cards, and emails. Written items must be precise, edited, contain the appropriate language level for the reader, and convey information in a manner that can be interpreted by the reader (Graham-Clay, 2005). Newsletters in particular have proved useful by parents that may not find frequent two-way communication, such as face-to-face meetings, feasible (Bogenschneider & Stone,

1997). Bogenschneider and Stone (1997) stated that an advantage of newsletters is they are a method of timely communication that can be saved and referred to in the future. The time-consuming effort of written communication can be offset by these advantages.

Two-way communication methods between parents and teachers as defined by Graham-Clay (2005) are typically verbal and require interpersonal skills. Examples of these communication strategies are phone calls and conferences (Graham-Clay, 2005). Simmons (2002) suggested phone call conferences and phone updates, which occur early and often in the school year, are a preventative method to miscommunication. A two-way communication can provide a situation in which both teachers and parents convey their hopes for the student and gain knowledge and support required to best meet the needs of a particular student (Graham-Clay, 2005; Simmons, 2002).

Gilgore (2015) indicated that the proliferation of technology available today encourages timely and speedy communication, however, it should not be the only communication method of choice. A teacher cannot assume that all families of his/her students have access to technology or feel confident with using technology. The advantage of the speed and breadth of sending information via technology can also act as a deterrent by overwhelming all involved (Baskwill, 2013; Gilgore, 2015).

Obstacles to Consider

Many factors act against the establishment of effective teacher-parent communications. As found by Lazar and Slostad (1999), interpersonal skills and communication with parents is an area that is frequently missing or minimal in many teacher training curricula. Parent-teacher conferences are limited to a brief amount of time for realistic, fruitful exchange between the adults to take place (Graham-Clay,

2005). Due to the increase in diversity found in schools today, teachers must be sensitive to the cultural differences of families in the classroom as well as potential language barriers. According to Epstein (1995), both cultural understanding and language translation can be an obstacle teachers face when attempting communications with parents. Specifically in Montessori school communications, teachers must be careful to limit industry jargon and phrases that are not commonly understood by the general public (Joyce, 2014).

Conclusion

The literature reviewed indicates that there are many approaches to parent-teacher communication and education. Each approach requires thoughtfulness, interaction, feedback, and restructuring along the way to build effectiveness. The studies and approaches in the review were evaluated and specific to a particular situation. It appears that there is not a single proven solution for all situations and communication between the teachers, parents, and schools. A combination approach was recommended in several instances, which would provide a variety of opportunities for effective communication.

Even though parent education has been in existence for more than one hundred fifty years, parent education techniques continue to lack research data that details its effectiveness (Hoard & Shepard, 2005; Thaman, 1998; Croake & Glover, 1977). The study conducted by Hiles (2015) concluded that there was limited research available concerning parents' understanding of Montessori education. Since Montessori educational methodology is unique, it is important that parents understand the principles supporting the method, as well as the materials used.

According to the literature, there are benefits for using written communication between teachers and parents. It is an effective means that provides a future reference for parents. Parent education is another method that is beneficial in communicating Montessori educational materials and methodology.

Consideration of all of these ideas ultimately led to the action research question: How will parent education events and bi-weekly print communications focused on Montessori materials in both primary and elementary classrooms, affect parents' understanding of the work children are doing in the classroom?

Methodology

The methods utilized to answer my action research question were a combination of parent education events and print communications. To begin my action research project, I conducted two parent meetings, explained my project, and gathered baseline information. The two parent meetings were identical in terms of format and content, but allowed parents to choose time of day and childcare options that best fit their schedule. Parents completed active consent forms during these meetings. Information was collected regarding best days, times, and any childcare requirements in order for parents to attend meetings.

A pre-information gathering form was distributed that included background questions asking the number of years the parent had children in a Montessori classroom and whether the parent had experienced a Montessori education themselves. Other questions were aimed at understanding the parents' view of the Montessori materials, classroom instruction, and use of identical Montessori materials in both the primary and elementary classrooms (see Appendix A).

Next, using the baseline data collected, I scheduled and planned parent education events for two weeks, with sessions on a variety of evenings so that parents could have an option of when to attend. The primary classroom (early childhood) teacher and I (elementary teacher) planned to present the same information twice, on both Monday at 5:00pm and Tuesday at 3:30pm. Childcare was provided both afternoons for children attending the school as well their siblings. I selected Montessori materials common to both the primary classroom (ages 3-6) and elementary classroom (ages 6-12) to present to the parents. This selection allowed attending parents to gain knowledge pertinent to their child's classroom, an understanding that the same materials were used at the different levels for different learning objectives, and to experience the multifaceted properties of the materials. Based on my understanding of the Montessori primary environment as an assistant for twelve years, and on my understanding of the Montessori elementary environment as a trained AMI elementary guide, I chose materials within the Language and Math areas for my two parent education evenings. This is because these two curriculum areas contained materials common to both the primary and elementary Montessori classrooms.

The format for the parent education events was as follows:

- A brief introduction explaining how the event would proceed.

- A primary (ages 3-6) lesson presented by the primary teacher.

- An elementary (ages 6-12) lesson presented by myself (the elementary teacher).

- A brief discussion during which parents were encouraged to share what they noticed regarding the lessons.

- A brief presentation during which specific points about the lessons and attributes of the primary and elementary child were discussed.

- A feedback form distributed and completed by parents.

- A final open discussion.

Dates for the evenings were finalized, and an email went to all families inviting them to participate. Additional reminders were given in person at either drop-off or pickup time, and email reminders were also sent.

During the Language parent education event, the primary lesson for adjectives was presented. The Montessori materials required for this lesson were the grammar symbol box, the farm (a wooden barn, fencing, and box of farm animals), and writing tray materials. One parent in attendance was invited to act as a student invited to the lesson. Using a slip of paper, the teacher wrote the object that they would like the student to retrieve from the farm. The student and teacher repeated several trips of object retrieval from the farm, with the teacher indicating that the object the student brought was not the one the teacher had in mind. Finally, the teacher wrote another descriptive word asking the student to bring that particular object, the student brought the object, and the teacher introduced the grammar symbols for nouns, adjectives, and articles. Following the lesson, all parents in attendance were invited to walk past the presentation table to see the grammar symbols for nouns, adjectives, and articles as well as the slips of paper with the words used and identified as the noun, adjective, and article.

Afterwards, the elementary lesson for verbs was presented. Montessori materials used included the verb grammar box, and the grammar symbol box. Several parents in attendance were invited to act as the students for this lesson. During the lesson, the

students read cards containing a sentence (e.g., "Open the blue book"). Next, the students acted out the sentence and then constructed the sentence by sequencing small word cards, matching them to the correct places in the verb grammar box, word for word. As part of the lesson, the students repeatedly read and acted out sentences. Finally, the teacher reviewed the grammar symbols already familiar to the children and introduced the verb grammar symbols and the term verb.   Parents saw that the same grammar symbols for the nouns, adjectives, and articles were used in both the primary and elementary lessons. The elementary lesson had an additional material, the verb grammar box.

Next followed a discussion with the parents that asked them to consider similarities and differences between the primary and elementary lessons. They were also asked to compare and contrast these lessons regarding the method by which the students are presented information. A brief presentation explained where the primary and elementary aged children were developmentally in exploring language as a subject. Descriptions of the Montessori material were given to define some ways in which the children build and layer information in the Montessori classroom. The intent was to present the depth and layering of the Montessori materials in the sense that the materials have more than one purpose and use in both of the classrooms.

Finally, feedback forms (see Appendix B) were distributed to ascertain whether the parent was previously familiar with the material and lessons, and whether the lessons presented were clear and understandable. An open discussion was available if parents had other specific questions or thoughts, or parents could choose to leave after completing the feedback form.

The focus of the second parent education event was Math. Following a brief introduction, the primary lesson for counting the ten-square chain was presented. Montessori materials required for this lesson were the ten-square chain, the numbered labels, and a felt mat to protect the glass beads. One parent in attendance was invited to act as a student invited to the lesson. The teacher assisted the student in counting and labeling the ten-square chain. Afterward, the teacher pointed to labels and had the student read back the numbers in reverse order, from one hundred down to one.

Next, two elementary Math lessons were presented: multiples and squaring of numbers. Montessori materials used in both of these lessons were the square bead chains, labels, and a felt mat. Several parents in attendance were invited to act as the students for these lessons. Students chose and labeled the five-square chain during the multiples lesson. Upon completion of the labeling, the concept of multiples was introduced. An extension of this lesson was presented with two bead chains: the five-square and the seven-square chain. The students labeled the two bead chains and then labels were removed and held by the teacher. Next, the teacher randomly chose a label and read the number. In a game-like fashion, students volunteered and placed the label in the appropriate location on the chain. A second lesson investigating squaring of numbers was presented with two different students. The teacher folded the four-square chain to make a four by four square. Next, the teacher guided the students to count the number of beads forming each side of the square. Using blank tickets, the teacher wrote and explained the equation and notation of the number four squared.

A discussion and brief presentation as described in the Language parent education event occurred; the difference was that the core information analyzed Math. The event

concluded with feedback forms (see Appendix B) distribution and an optional, open

discussion.

The parent education events were recorded and a YouTube video was posted to

the school website. Parents unable to attend were invited to review the video via an

email request. A feedback form was available on the school website that was identical to

the one found in Appendix B. In addition, the primary classroom teacher and I met for an

interview session. I asked questions regarding prior requests for material usage, general

feedback for the parent education events, and suggestions for improvement.

Concurrently, a bi-weekly blog entry was added to the school website. The bi-weekly

blog entry was called *Montessori Musings,* and I wrote the first elementary classroom

entry. It was a story about teaching the elementary children the game *Black Jack* as a fun

activity. More importantly, the children practiced their math facts by playing this game.

After I gave the primary teacher my Black Jack story, I asked her to write something for

her classroom. I added her story to mine and formatted a blog entry on our school

website. An email was sent to all families in the school to tell them that the blog had

been updated. I coordinated and posted the communications bi-weekly, and each teacher

wrote the content for her own classroom.

A final meeting was held and the post-information gathering form was distributed

to parents (see Appendix C). Questions were the same as on the pre-information

gathering questionnaire (Appendix A) but included was a question indicating the method

used to view the parent education events. A final, open discussion was moderated using

the following questions:

- Parent education talks were based on a particular primary and elementary lesson with a shared material. Was this format helpful in understanding how your child works in the classroom?

- Did you read the *Montessori Musings* blogs on the school website?

- Were the blogs helpful in understanding how your child works in the classroom?

Finally, discussion opened for general ideas on topics, format, and feedback for future parent education events and blogs.

Data Analysis

A total of twenty-two parents were participants in this study. Participants were parents of students in either the primary (ages 3-6) classroom or the elementary (ages 6-12) classroom at our small, private Montessori school.

Data Source #1: Pre-Information Gathering

During the first meeting, I queried parents regarding their personal educational background and the number of years their child attended a Montessori school. Of the 22 participants, only one parent had experienced a Montessori education themselves. Of the participants, 36% had children enrolled in a Montessori school for fewer than two years, and 64% of the participants had children enrolled in a Montessori school for two years or more.

One hundred percent of the parents understood Montessori education to be self-directed, amidst an independent choice of materials in the classroom. The next several questions targeted instructional content of a three-year Montessori program. Participants responded to the question of whether all of the children in a single Montessori primary

classroom (ages 3-6), or a single Montessori lower elementary classroom (ages 6-9), or a

single Montessori upper elementary classroom (ages 9-12) received an identical set of

instructional lessons by the conclusion of a three-year program. 32% of the parents were

uncertain whether children received an identical set of lessons during the three years in

the classroom. 41% of the parents were uncertain whether children in the lower

elementary classroom received an identical set of lessons, and 50% of the parents were

uncertain whether children in the upper elementary classroom received an identical set of

lessons during the three years in the classroom (Figure 1).
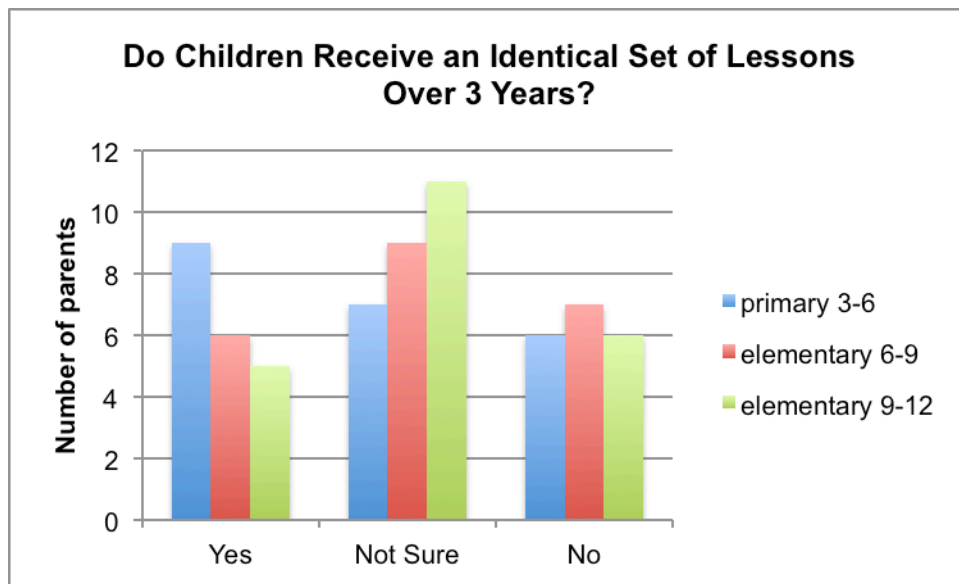
Figure 1. Participant responses: Do children receive an identical set of lessons over
three years in the classroom?

Another series of questions asked parents whether the materials in an individual

classroom were exclusively used in that classroom. Since the elementary classroom in

our school is a combined ages 6-12 classroom, the remaining questions were structured

for the entire elementary classroom. The results indicated that parents had more doubts

with reference to the elementary classroom materials than the primary classroom

materials (Figure 2).

Materials are Only Used in this Classroom?
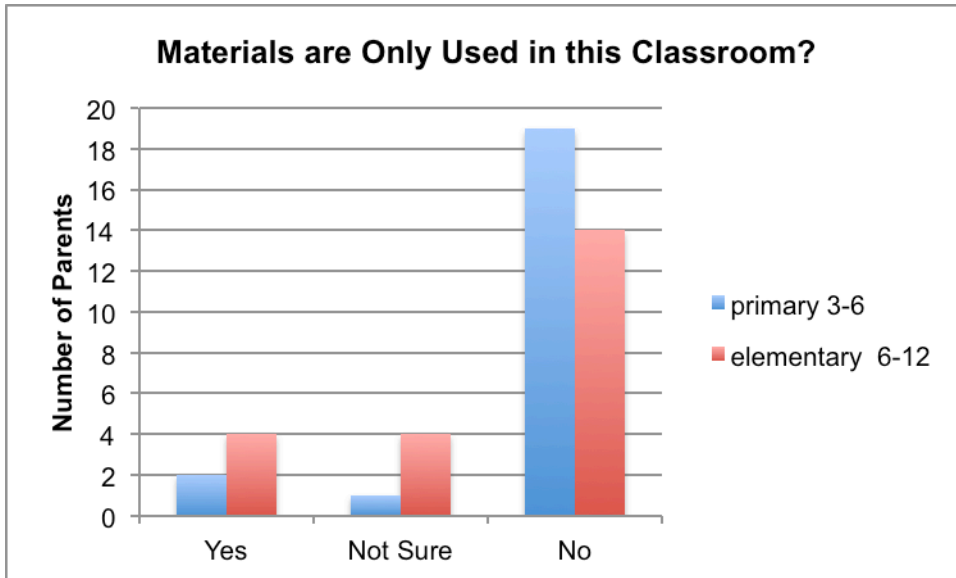
*Figure 2*. Participant responses: Are materials used exclusively in this classroom?

The next sequence of questions determined whether parents thought the materials in the classroom served a single purpose. Results indicated that parents felt many classroom materials had multiple purposes (Figure 3).

Materials Serve a Single Purpose and a Single Lesson?
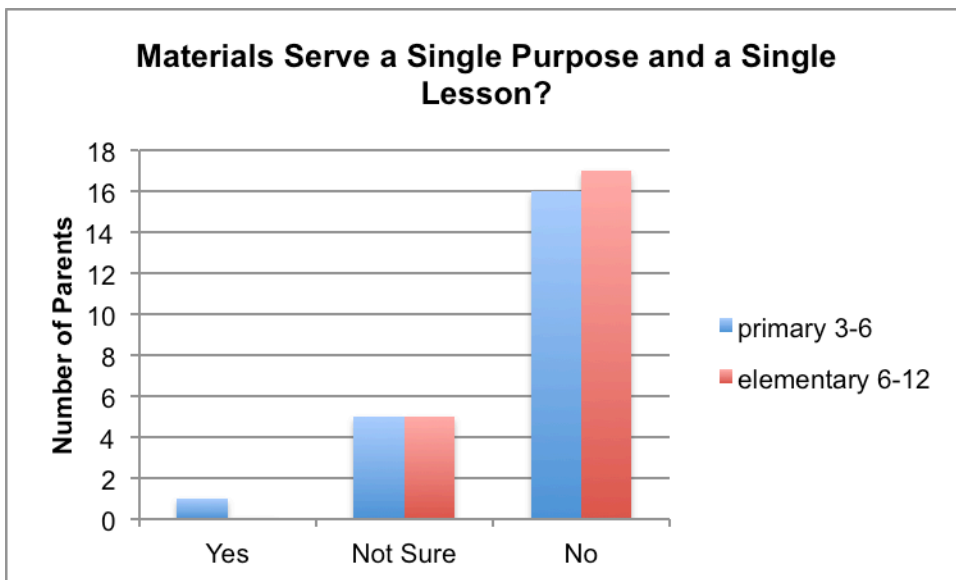
Figure 3. Participant responses: Are materials used for a single purpose?

Data Source #2: Feedback Forms

Both a primary classroom lesson and an elementary classroom lesson were presented during each of the parent education evenings. Each participant completed feedback forms acknowledging any prior understanding of the lesson presented. Data analysis revealed that most parents did not have any previous knowledge of the lessons (Figures 4,5).
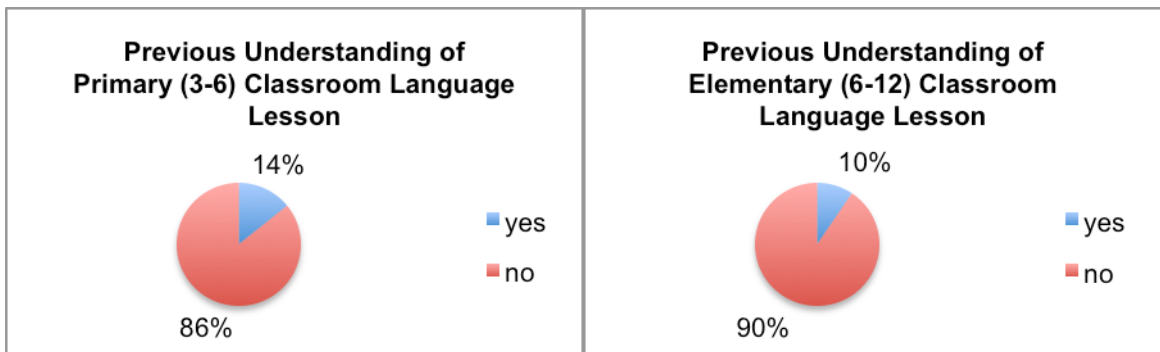
Figure 4. Participants had prior knowledge of Language classroom lesson
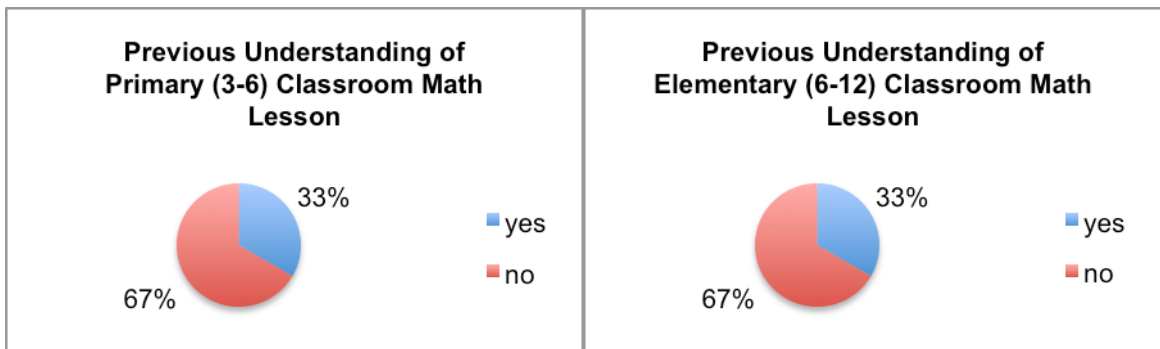
Figure 5. Participants had prior knowledge of Math classroom lesson

Participants were invited to comment on the clarity of the primary and elementary lessons. One hundred percent of the parents indicated that both the primary and elementary lessons were clearly presented. Finally, parents were asked whether the explanation designating where the primary and elementary aged children were

developmentally in exploring language and math as subjects was helpful. One hundred

percent of the parents responded that the explanation was helpful.

An analysis of the final open-ended question generated two tables (Table 1 and Table 2):

Response	Coding
It was helpful to know what and how my children are learning. This is important to me since this is so different from the way I learned as a child.	Positive – parent feels informed
Clear presentation that showed how Montessori methods are able to "bridge" age groups and abilities. The quick lessons or "layers" were great examples of being able to extract even more lessons from the same materials.	Positive – connection between classrooms
Truly love this lesson.	Positive – appreciation of lesson
The lesson was both interactive and entertaining. My only concern is the discipline required to stay engaged, especially if frustration sets in.	Positive – interactive 　　　appreciation of lesson 　　　how children learn Negative – self discipline
The lesson was great and I see why and how the students catch on to the language learning techniques very fast.	Positive – appreciation of lesson 　　　how children learn
Very interesting how children will go on and learn as a group.	Positive – interactive/interaction 　　　collaboration
Very interesting to see the building blocks of what they learn in primary and how it is built upon in elementary.	Positive – connection between classrooms
I appreciated the energy and excitement put into the presentation. What a fun way to learn.	Positive – appreciation of lesson 　　　how children learn
Appreciate the opportunity to peek at what goes on here.	Positive – parent feels informed
Love to see more.	Positive – appreciation of lesson

Table 1. Language Parent Education Event Feedback from Participants

Response	Coding
It is so nice that children are given new abstract ways of understanding the same concrete material that they have already become familiar with.	Positive – abstract from concrete
The lessons presented were excellent, visual/hands-on approaches to learning math principals. It's a pretty stark contrast to "traditional" elementary school styles. In my opinion, much easier to learn and retain.	Positive – visual/hands-on
Great lesson! Very informative!	Positive – appreciation of lesson parent feels informed
It was great!	Positive – appreciation of lesson
I like the visual representation; it should provide a stronger foundation than simply memorizing times tables.	Positive – visual/hands-on
I really enjoy the small squares of paper that form an equation.	Positive – visual/hands-on
Appreciated the explanation of the main points of the lessons and what they lead into later.	Positive – abstract from concrete
Would love to learn more lessons.	Positive – appreciation of lesson

*Table 2*. Math Parent Education Event Feedback from Participants

Two consistent themes emerged in the feedback tables (Table 1 and 2): appreciation of

the lesson presented and parent felt informed. These themes affirmed the communication

between the parents and school was aiding parent's understanding of classroom lessons.

Parents also began to understand how the children learn through hands on Montessori

materials, start learning with concrete materials and move to abstract concepts, and work

collaboratively. Participants saw the connection between the classrooms and thus the

continuum of the Montessori curriculum.

Data Source #3: Post-Information Gathering

At the final post-information gathering meeting, participants answered questions identical to those posed at the pre-information gathering. Based on the data collected, I discovered that 36% of the participants took advantage of viewing the parent talks via the videos posted online. Thus, the video recording and online distribution of the evening's presentation was significant in allowing participation in my study. No change occurred in that one hundred percent of the parents understood Montessori education to be self-directed, amidst an independent choice of materials in the classroom.

In response to the questions regarding an identical set of instructional lessons being received by children completing a three-year program, the data conveyed that fewer parents were uncertain. Post-intervention, 16% (as compared to 32% pre-intervention) of the parents were uncertain whether children received an identical set of lessons during the three years in the primary classroom. Post-intervention, 16% (as compared to 41% pre-intervention) of the parents were uncertain whether children in the lower elementary classroom received an identical set of lessons, and 32% (as compared to 50% pre-intervention) of the parents were uncertain whether children in the upper elementary classroom received an identical set of lessons during the three years in the classroom (Figure 6).
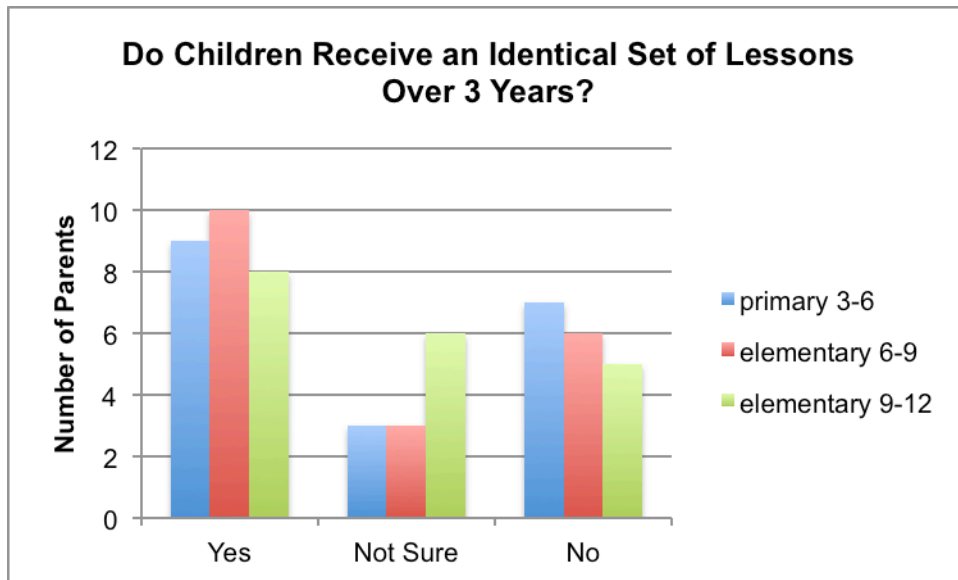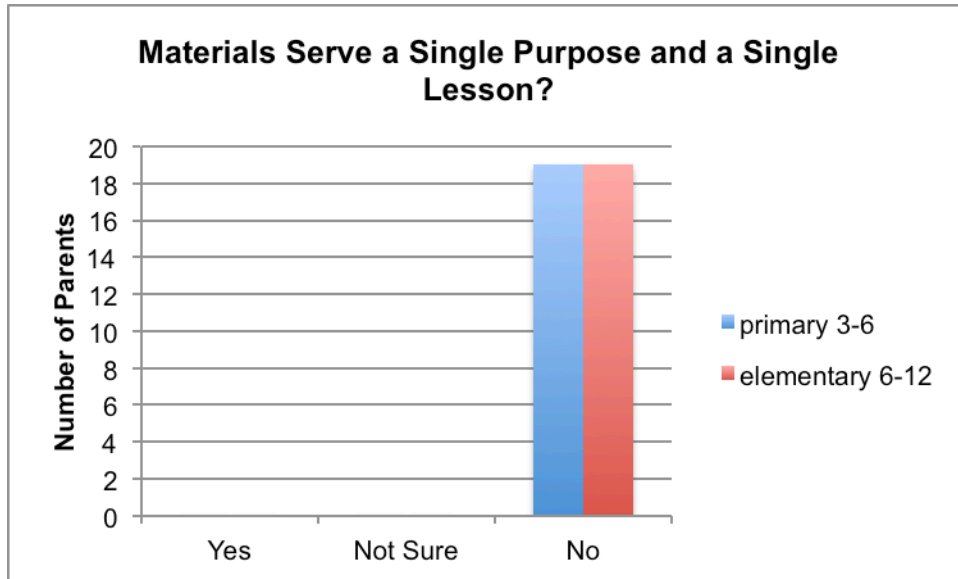
Figure 6. Participant responses post-intervention: Do children receive an identical set of lessons over three years in the classroom?

The next series of questions asked parents if the materials in a particular

classroom were limited to that classroom. The results showed that one hundred percent

of the parents knew that the materials were used in both the primary and elementary

classrooms, as opposed to pre-intervention when 14% were thinking yes or were unsure

for primary and 36% were thinking yes or were unsure for elementary (Figure 7).
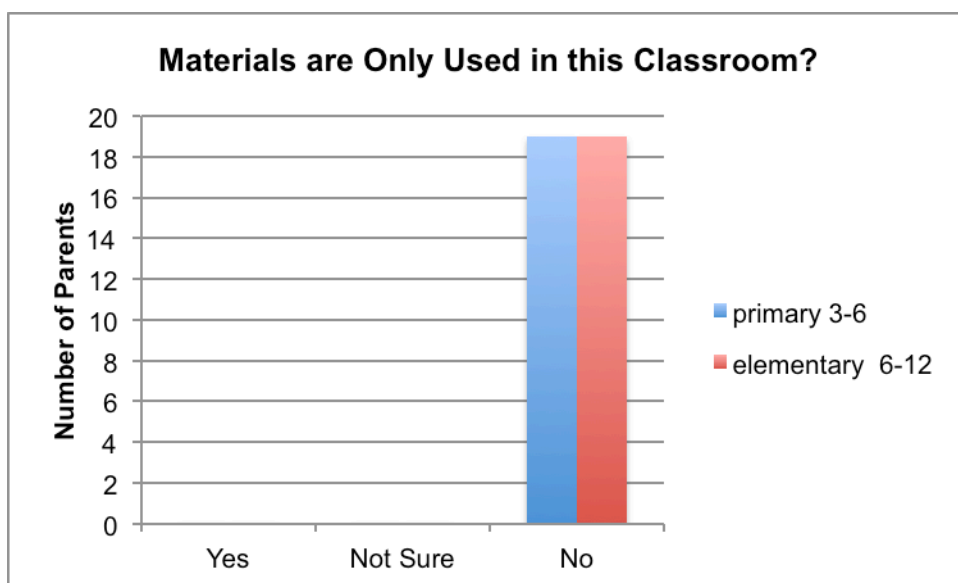
Figure 7. Participant responses post-intervention: Are materials used exclusively in this classroom?

The final series of questions asked parents whether the materials in the classroom served a single purpose. The results showed that one hundred percent of the parents now knew that the materials in both the primary and elementary classrooms had multiple purposes, as opposed to pre-intervention when 27% were thinking yes or were unsure for primary and 23% were thinking yes or were unsure for elementary (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Participant responses post-intervention: Are materials used for a single purpose?

Data Source #3: Post-Information Gathering – Discussion

During a discussion at the post-information gathering, parents commented on the addition of bi-weekly blog posts of events happening in the primary and elementary classrooms. The bi-weekly stories were entitled "Montessori Musings," and parents having read the stories verbally responded favorably during a discussion period. An email was sent to parents that described how to get to the blog post on the school website. Parents expressed difficulty in finding the blog posts and suggested that perhaps in the future, the email would contain the entire link and/or text of the message.

Participants discussed the manner in which the education talks enhanced their understanding of their child's work in the classroom. Main themes emerged from the discussion including the lesson detail and connection to the Montessori theory. An analysis of the results were placed in the following table (Table 3):

Response	Coding
I enjoyed seeing the detail of the lessons and what specifically the children are seeing each day.	Positive – detail
Seeing the whole process all the way through was nice.	Positive – detail
The detail of the talks was helpful.	Positive - detail
Understanding one element and how in appears in other places was eye-opening.	Positive – connection to theory
Helpful insight into the "inner workings" of the Montessori method.	Positive – connection to theory

Table 3. Post-Intervention Feedback from Participants: How were parent education events helpful in understanding work your child does in the classroom?

The final discussion during the meeting was comprised of comments, suggestions, and ideas for future parent and school communication. Parents responded positively and proposed ideas to incorporate in the action plan for the next phase (see action plan at end of report).

Data Source #4: Interview with Primary Teacher

I interviewed the primary teacher and asked her whether, during the time she taught in the primary classroom at this Montessori school, she had responded to questions specifically addressing materials in the classroom. She commented that she had fielded questions regarding materials in the past. Given that a child spent three years in a

particular classroom, parents questioned the breadth of the materials. She acknowledged the lessons demonstrated in the parent education talks granted the participants an opportunity to comprehend the extent of the materials.

Next, we discussed the clarity of the primary and elementary lessons presented to the parents. She perceived that the parents understood the lessons presented. In her opinion, the information and discussion were invaluable to the parents' learning. We discussed the benefit of giving an entire lesson with specific Montessori materials, as was done during this project. Participants experienced the lesson as their child would and parents noticed how the senses are incorporated in Montessori lessons.

We also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of parents substituting as "Montessori children" in the lessons. At times, the teacher felt the need to provide significant explanation to the parent since they were unfamiliar with nuances of the classroom. For example, a child in the classroom would know certain materials by name or know how to handle carrying materials necessary for the lesson. The parents required an explanation for how to do specific tasks or clarification for where an item was to be found. In other instances, the teacher felt the need to rush the lesson because parents understood the concept being presented. Therefore, some reactions to the lesson were not as pure as those a child might exhibit.

Data Analysis Conclusion

Based on discussions and comments collected in the open-ended portion of the information gathering forms, I understood that parents appreciated the content of the parent education events. The participants articulated that lessons presented during the parent education events engaged them by watching the interaction between participants in

the elementary lesson. All lessons provided movement and a visual/hands-on approach to learning involving a sensory experience. Participants expressed an appreciation of the connection between the classrooms through the materials, and the manner in which there was a continuum of learning, abstract concepts being developed through concrete lessons, thus facilitating the path to abstract knowledge. Receiving the lesson in the manner that a child receives that lesson allowed the participant to focus on the characteristics of the children in either a primary or elementary classroom. The Montessori teaching style is centered on each individual child and the developmental characteristics of the particular child. Giving the participants an awareness of the different characteristics aided their understanding of the teaching method. A disadvantage of using parents to serve as "Montessori children" in the lessons is that there cannot be full comprehension of all facets of a lesson, such as self-correction. This is because the adults often know the skill being taught and they are not working with the material repeatedly to gain a skill.

One hundred percent of the participants understood that some similar Montessori materials could be found in both the primary and elementary classrooms and used effectively for several different purposes. Participants were unclear whether all children received identical lessons during a three-year program. This indicated that either not enough emphasis was placed on this idea during the parent education events or the question on the form was poorly worded.

Participants did respond positively to the bi-weekly communication, however, communication was underutilized due to the parents' misunderstanding of the technology. Parents preferred either an exact link to the location sent via email or the actual text included in the email. Parents enjoyed adding parent education discussions to

days and times with childcare available, and suggested potluck dinners as an occasional

preferred setting. They also enjoyed the availability of online videos and requested an

archive so new parents could view prior presentations.

Parents indicated a clear understanding of lessons presented in the parent

education events. However, not every lesson for each child in the school could be

presented. Parents whose children were being given those specific lessons appreciated

the knowledge of what their child was doing in the classroom. Other parents may have

recognized those lessons from a prior conversation with their child. Some parents,

therefore, gained a timely understanding of their child's work in the classroom. Several

parents acknowledged previous work completed by their child, while still others

understood work their child would accomplish in the future. The parent education events

served as an effective means of communicating Montessori methodology to parents.

Action Plan

Using the results of the research acquired during the action research project, I will

modify the structure of parent communication at our school. Prior to the project, parent

education events were held four times per year on Wednesday evenings at 7:30pm. No

childcare was available, the staff determined topics for the education events, and themes

were not usually posted prior to the event. During the project, parents expressed the

desire to have a variety of days, times, and childcare available for the parent education

events. An implementation idea is to solicit thoughts on days and times twice yearly,

once in the fall and again in the early spring as family schedules are apt to change. Some

parents suggested having a potluck dinner in conjunction with the parent education

events. I plan to implement potluck dinners twice yearly. The school is currently

planning a potluck dinner with an open house. During the open house, students bring parents into the classroom and show them one or several lessons. Dependent upon the outcome, the potluck dinners might continue with the open house rather than a parent education event.

In the past, the school has determined topics for parent education evenings based on areas in the classroom. For example, four parent education evening topics were scheduled annually: Language, Math, Sensorial, and Practical Life. These topics stem from the primary classroom areas. I will continue to define topics for parent education evenings based on areas of the classroom, expanding to include elementary and adolescent curriculum. Questions or concerns brought to the attention of the school staff will also be used to determine the topics scheduled. In addition, an open question and answer session at the end of the parent education events will enable parents to actively partake and have their questions answered. Through observing their students' learning, queries and points of interest may arise for parents during the school year. They will therefore have the opportunity to add ideas for future parent education events to an idea box on the school website.

One topic of interest proposed by the parents was Montessori grace and courtesy. Grace and courtesy lessons are given in the Montessori classrooms to model and enact cooperative, peaceful, respectful behavior. I plan to prepare a grace and courtesy parent education event. Since parents appreciated the detail in the specific lessons and the opportunity to see the lesson the entire way through, I will keep a similar format to the education events. Both a primary and an elementary lesson would be presented, followed by a discussion, then a brief presentation concerning why the lessons are given based

upon the characteristics of the children in that classroom. This format will allow for the experience of both primary and elementary lessons in the same event. I plan to continue a similar format for future parent education events with specific lesson demonstrations and a theory-based presentation and discussion. The feedback form will be modified to include questions specific to the topic presented.

Participants expressed specific inquiries related to the transitions to the next level, specifically primary to elementary and elementary to adolescent classrooms. I plan to implement an annual parent education event for families that have children transitioning from primary to elementary. This meeting will encompass topics that are specific and unique to the elementary environment such as teaching approach, research, and excursions outside of the classroom. The adolescent teacher will prepare a similar event for families moving from the elementary into the adolescent classroom. Topics will include the hog operation, which is the farming portion of our school's adolescent program, micro-economy, and structuring a self-study area of interest.

The two topics of interest to families, grace and courtesy and classroom transitions, can be addressed within the school year, during the yearly typically planned parent educational events.

There follows ideas that can be considered for future planning. Technology can be an asset in the implementation of future enhancements to communication with parents. The bi-weekly stories were appreciated by the parents who read them, however, parents expressed difficulty in displaying the website on a smartphone and accessing the link to the blog. A suggestion to address this difficulty was to distribute a school-wide email encompassing information for two weeks. All of the information from every classroom

will be included per the request of the parents. All text will be included in the email rather than a link to the blog or website. Another idea to investigate is the potential of sharing the blog postings and school calendar through a subscription option. Parents were eager to have education events available online, therefore, I plan to consider formatting the videos in a professional manner and archiving them online through our school website.

Another idea expressed during the project was to explore ways of assisting parents having a traditional educational background, in understanding procedures their child is sharing with them at home. The parents expressed that they understand the educational concept the child is learning, but not the teaching approach to the concept. One idea was to provide keys and nomenclature of some of the Montessori lesson names and ideas. Parents thought that a mapping of Montessori lesson or material names to that utilized in a traditional educational system would be helpful. I plan to continue conversations with parents to understand which concepts were confusing to them. I will then research the feasibility of choosing a few lessons and planning a way to educate the parents further.

One of the most valuable ideas that I gained from my experience is that parent communication is an ever-evolving process. A constant flow of ideas between the parents and school is welcomed and appreciated. Reaching the greatest number of parents allows for the largest exchange of ideas. In order to reach the greatest number of parents, a variety of methods and topics is required. Parents appreciate understanding the specifics of what their child is doing in the classroom and the manner is which it is happening.

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Appendix A

Pre- Information Gathering

- □ Check here if you would like to continue but prefer not to have your responses included in the study.
- □ Check here if you would like to continue and will allow your responses to be included in the study.

Completion of these questions is voluntary and confidential. Completing this feedback form is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time.

1. Did you have a Montessori education as a child? If so, what ages did you attend a Montessori school?

   yes   no   ages attended _____

2. How many years has your child been enrolled in a Montessori school? _____

3. A Montessori education includes self-directed, independent choice of materials in the classroom.

   true   not sure   false

4. All children in a primary Montessori classroom receive the same instruction (lessons) by the time they leave the 3-year program (ages 3-6).

   true   not sure   false

5. All children in an elementary Montessori classroom receive the same instruction (lessons) by the time they leave the 3-year program (ages 6-9).

   true   not sure   false

6. All children in an elementary Montessori classroom receive the same instruction (lessons) by the time they leave the 3-year program (ages 9-12).

   true   not sure   false

7. Materials in the primary (ages 3-6) classroom are only used in that classroom.

   true   not sure   false

8. Materials in the elementary (ages 6-12) classroom are only used in that classroom.

   true   not sure   false

9. Materials in the primary (ages 3-6) classroom serve a single purpose and are used for a single lesson.

   true   not sure   false

10. Materials in the elementary (ages 6-12) classroom serve a single purpose and are used for a single lesson.

    true   not sure   false

11. What times/days will work best for parent education talks?

Appendix B

Parent Talk Feedback Form

☐ Check here if you would like to continue but prefer not to have your responses included in the study.

☐ Check here if you would like to continue and will allow your responses to be included in the study.

Completion of these questions is voluntary and anonymous (or confidential). Completing this feedback form is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time.

1. Did you have a prior understanding of the primary Montessori material that was presented this evening?

    yes   no

2. Did you have a prior understanding of the elementary Montessori material that was presented this evening?

    yes   no

3. Was the presentation of the primary Montessori material clear?
    yes   no

4. Was the presentation of the elementary Montessori material clear?
    yes   no

5. Was the discussion regarding the approach of the lessons given to the primary and elementary children helpful?

    yes   no

6. Do you have any specific feedback to the information provided today?

Appendix C

Post- Information Gathering

☐   Check here if you would like to continue but prefer not to have your responses included in the study.
☐   Check here if you would like to continue and will allow your responses to be included in the study.

   Completion of these questions is voluntary and confidential. Completing this feedback form is
   completely voluntary and you may quit at any time.

1. Did you attend the first parent talk or view it electronically?

    attended   viewed electronically

2. Did you attend the second parent talk or view it electronically?

    attended   viewed electronically

3. A Montessori education includes self-directed, independent choice of materials in the classroom.

    true   not sure   false

4. All children in a primary Montessori classroom receive the same instruction (lessons) by the time they
    leave the 3-year program (ages 3-6).

    true   not sure   false

5. All children in an elementary Montessori classroom receive the same instruction (lessons) by the time
    they leave the 3-year program (ages 6-9).

    true   not sure   false

6. All children in an elementary Montessori classroom receive the same instruction (lessons) by the time
    they leave the 3-year program (ages 9-12).

    true   not sure   false

7. Materials in the primary (ages 3-6) classroom are only used in that classroom.

    true   not sure   false

8. Materials in the elementary (ages 6-12) classroom are only used in that classroom.

    true   not sure   false

9. Materials in the primary (ages 3-6) classroom serve a single purpose and are used for a single lesson.

    true   not sure   false

10. Materials in the elementary (ages 6-12) classroom serve a single purpose and are used for a single
    lesson.

    true   not sure   false

11. Do you have any other specific feedback to provide and/or ideas for future parent talk evenings?