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The Effectiveness of an Online Record-Keeping Program on Montessori Parent Appreciation.

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Abstract

This action research project was conducted with the parents of children enrolled in a private, urban Montessori Primary (3-6) class. The study implemented the use of the Transparent Classroom, an online record keeping program. The purpose of the study was to determine if implementing this program would impact parent appreciation and understanding of the Montessori Method and the daily activities of the classroom. The Transparent Classroom uses instant, real-time presentation updates, photos, and long-term recordkeeping software. The study compared the response times between when the information was sent and accessed by traditional email, text messaging and logging in autonomously. Parent interactions were also measured and recorded. Questionnaire responses provided feedback on the effectiveness of the Transparent Classroom before and after the study. The results show the positive impact of the use of the Transparent Classroom as a useful communication tool. Increased communication of the children’s daily activities through Transparent Classroom online record keeping system helped to improve their level of appreciation and increased the parents’ feelings of connectedness with their children’s daily activities and the Montessori Method. The positive impact of a deeper appreciation of what children do in their classrooms each day could benefit the students, the parents, the teacher, the school, and ultimately, the community.

Keywords: Montessori, Transparent Classroom, online record keeping, AMI, primary
Introduction

It is not uncommon for parents to feel a disconnect between home and school. These issues are compounded within the Montessori environment; Montessori schools do not use traditional methods, such as tests or grades, to assess student progress. Additionally, Montessori jargon can be confusing and even be alienating. Lack of parental knowledge about the Montessori philosophy and methodology is a primary factor in misunderstandings (Damore, 2004). This can lead to misconceptions about the child's learning if the parent does not fully understand the way Montessori assessments are recorded (Damore, 2004). Parents must feel they are part of the partnership between home and school for children to be successful in the classroom. Bridging the gap between home and school is such an essential component of honoring the child. Helping parents to feel as though they are partners in their child’s education is crucial. Remembering that parents are the children’s first teachers is a Montessori principle that teachers must find new and unique ways to honor.

Montessori teachers are experiencing a problem with lack of parent appreciation and knowledge of the Montessori Method and the daily activities in a Primary Montessori, pre-k 3-6 classroom. This issue was identified after several parents noted they felt a disconnection between the general Montessori theory they think they understand and what is happening each day in the classroom. A goal of this research is to find effective ways to deepen parent’s appreciation of the Montessori Method as it is applied in the Primary Classroom. Parents report they do not feel they
know the daily on-goings and academic progress of their children. Currently, parents receive a progress report two times a year, at the end of the first and second semester. To address this, this study implemented an online record-keeping program the Transparent Classroom to test the utility of this program to resolve the problem. This program appears to offer many features that may resolve the issues teachers are reporting. These features are parent-friendly and provide an explanation of materials presented daily in the environment.

The Transparent Classroom is an online record keeping program that can be used for Toddler, Primary or Elementary classes. It has preloaded Association Montessori Internationale AMI Montessori lessons available from which teachers can choose. Each lesson has a brief description of the actual lesson, a photograph or illustration from an AMI Montessori album, and a section that describes activities parents can carry out at home to support the work in the classroom. There are user-friendly ways to tag children and lessons to record from a classroom iPad or even upload photos from faculty members phones (Lightsmith Consulting, LLC, 2015).

I chose to implement The Transparent Classroom based on the findings of Michelle Ellis, my previous experience with Montessori Records Xpress and colleagues experience with Montessori Compass. If proven effective, the implementation of the Transparent Classroom program will alleviate many of the issues parents are having. The online application advertises all of the components to meet the needs and ease the concerns of parents, which are understanding what their children are doing each day, having a general idea of the Montessori theory and philosophy and knowing how their children are progressing in the classroom.
Literature Review

Ellis explored the use of an online program for Montessori classrooms, Montessori Compass. In her study, Ellis compared the use of an online application versus other forms of parent communication, including email and phone calls. Ellis used each method and found that the Montessori Compass was the most effective. Her research showed improvement in connection with the use of an online program. Ellis found the use of websites was overwhelmingly effective (Ellis, 2015).

Online Montessori record keeping programs are helpful and can be useful, as they provide a user-friendly record keeping systems. Studies also showed that interactive grade books contained the essential information parents were seeking to parents in a coherent and easy to understand manner (Mathern 2009). The individual parent portals also offer privacy with the information given only to parents. It also gave parents insight and access to the teacher (Starkie, 2013).

Montessori Compass and Montessori Records Xpress, two online record keeping programs are reported as not being user-friendly. Montessori Records Xpress does not offer the option to use photographs, and the observation reports were said to be cumbersome. It is set up to produce progress reports only twice a year.

Past studies researched many different methods to improve parent-teacher communication. Symeou describes current commonly used means of communication:

“School communication with families is usually written or oral. Written communication might take the form of memos, lists, forms, permission notes, report cards, calendars of the school year, and notices of special events sent to the home. It refers to individual children, the whole class, or
the school community as a whole. Schools usually establish some formal ways for achieving oral school-family communication also, for instance, parent-teacher conferences and open houses. Finally, many informal ways of contacting and communicating with parents may provide opportunities in which teachers and parents gain insights into one another’s perspectives, for instance, casual conversations before-school, after-school meetings, and telephone calls.” (2012).

Both formal and informal communications between schools and families foster a sense of partnership on behalf of the student (Epstein, 2006). These partnerships help parents build a relationship with the teacher to foster collaborative relationships that benefit both the school and the child (Forsyth et al., 2006). Communication can be seen as attempts to involve parents in their child’s daily academic activities, one method being through encouraging extended learning activities at home (Epstein, 2006). By reaching out to parents to work with students at home, teachers provide opportunities to enhance and reinforce lessons taught in school (Epstein, 2006). Relationships based on trust and respect have been found to improve communication between teachers and parents (Noel, 2008). Noel found that the most harmful component in developing a trusting relationship between the guide and parents was conflict. The most common disputes were concerning parent involvement and student achievement (Noel, 2008). Frequent, honest, and personal communication between the teacher and parents helped build trusting relationships (Noel, 2008). Other teacher-controlled aspects of communication included spending a useful amount of time on communication, encouraging parent involvement, and proper teacher training (Noel, 2008).
Methodology

For this project, parents in a start-up Montessori school in a Primary classroom that serves children 3-6 years of age were asked to begin to use the Transparent Classroom. The study started by gaining active consent from the parents and informing them about the topic and purpose of the research. Parents were given a letter detailing the study and the participation requirements. They were asked to return the letters by the beginning of the second semester of school. A total of ten parents were asked to participate. All of the parents who were invited to use the new program accepted.

An account was registered and created for the school. Information about each student and their parents, including names, ages, email addresses, allergies, and more was input into the Transparent Classroom online record keeping program. All forms used to register children were recreated so parents would only have to fill out the recurring information requested one time. The attendance feature was set up so that parents could sign in and out each morning using the classroom iPad.

An initial meeting was held to introduce the online record keeping program and to explain how to use and implement all of its features. Online demonstrations were given, and parents were afforded the opportunity to experiment with the program. A brief question and answer session was held to ensure parents felt comfortable using the program. Parent demographic information was recorded, including age, race, marital status and socioeconomic status. The parents in this study were all new to the Montessori classroom having just one semester of experience.
Parents were also given a brief pre-study questionnaire. Parents were asked to answer honestly about their knowledge of the Montessori method, how they felt about previously receiving information in the classroom and their initial impression of the Transparent Classroom. Previous communication methods included traditional email, phone calls, face-to-face conversations and paper transmission sent with the child.

Parents returned their questionnaires, and their answers were recorded. This quantitative information offered a baseline for understanding what information parents wanted about their children and how they felt about previous classroom communication methods. The action research project took place over a four-week period.

The Transparent Classroom offers instant access to photos and lessons children are presented. Parents can log-in to see which presentations are being delivered and pictures their children are tagged in, in real time. Photos can be captioned to further explain activity in the classroom. Hashtags can be added to tag presentations to photos. Parents can read a short description of each presentation as they are notified that their child has had a presentation. Montessori jargon is used and explained in each description.

The Transparent Classroom provides the ability to track the log-in activity, information sent to, and accessed by, the parent. The parents received notification emails or text messages to their personal accounts indicating there was new information about their children in Transparent Classroom. The messages also served as a reminder to parents to access their accounts. The parents then accessed the system via their device of choice using a login feature with password protection. The Transparent Classroom team provided information on login times, duration and frequency of log-ins and was able to chart it.
The classroom iPad was used to record the materials that each student had worked with or photos of the children into the Transparent Classroom. Daily attendance was also recorded as well as, messages to the parents detailing any pertinent information about classroom activities or anecdotes from the day.

During the four-week study, parent behavior was observed and recorded. Parent inquiries and interactions were recorded to determine if the Transparent Classroom use was helping parents understanding of the work in the classroom. Daily interactions were recorded as they occurred to help time track when parents were notified by the Transparent Classroom that there was activity on their account and when the communication occurred. It was noted whether the comment or inquiry was Montessori theory based or program based. Notes were added to help determine the intent of each occurrence.

At the conclusion of the study, parents were given a second post-study questionnaire. Parents were asked similar questions as the pre-study questionnaire to determine if the Transparent Classroom was a beneficial addition to the classroom. The survey results provided information about the satisfaction with the Transparent Classroom and additional information sought by parents. This information will help determine if the Transparent Classroom is a viable option for improving communication.
Analysis of Data

The baseline data collected in the Parent Questionnaire Pre-Study initially showed varied results regarding parent’s feelings about parent-teacher communication prior to any interventions. 30% of parents responded that they thought they had a clear understanding of the daily activities of the classroom. 40% of parents reported they thought they had basic knowledge of the Montessori Method. Yet, 70% of parents thought they could easily communicate with the teacher. Parents were asked how they thought about the current method of communication in the classroom. Again, the responses varied, with 60% of parents responding positively stating it was easy, good and casual. 30% of parents responded that they see a need for improvement or that it was difficult. 10% of parents did not respond.

These results show that before any interventions were implemented, parents were not feeling very confident about their knowledge of the Montessori Method or the daily activities of the classroom. Parents did feel they could easily communicate with the teacher. This may be because of the small class size due to being the first year of operation.

Fig. 1 Parents Rate the Most Important Communication Features Pre-Study
When asked what information parents valued most about their child, 10% responded information about materials, 50% responded information about the classroom curriculum/Montessori Method, 10% responded information about the course of the day and 30% responded photos of their child.

A similar Post-Study Parent Questionnaire was distributed to measure how the parents thought at the end of the study to see if the incorporation of the Transparent Classroom and new communication strategies affected their appreciation of the Montessori Method and daily activities in the classroom. When the parents were asked how they were thinking post-intervention, the results were dramatically more positive. 90% percent of parents responded they had a clearer understanding of the daily activities in the classroom. 80% responded they thought they had basic knowledge of the Montessori Method and 100% of parents thought communication with the teacher improved.

Fig. 2 Parent Responses Post-Study
When asked if they thought the Transparent Classroom was a useful tool to improve communication between parents and teacher, 90% of parents responded that they thought it was. 100% of parents thought that after using the Transparent Classroom their understanding of the Montessori Method has increased and 90% of parents thought the individual information on their child's progress and weekly activities helped to make them feel more engaged in your child's education.

Fig. 3 Comparison between Pre and Post Study Response

When comparing the results of the Pre-Study and Post-Study Questionnaires, parents understanding of the daily activities of the classroom increased by significant amount in each of the three areas they were asked about. This shows the implementation of the Transparent
Classroom was beneficial to parent understanding of the daily activities, Montessori Method and communication with the classroom teacher.

The majority of responding parents wrote positive post-study comments with about the use of the Transparent Classroom in their child’s classroom. 90% percent of parents who responded to this question. Of those responses, 80% mentioned ease of use, the pictures of the children were appreciated and the explanation of materials as things they enjoyed in the program.

When asked what information parents desired that the Transparent Classroom did not provide, only 30% of parents responded. They listed grades and holiday and extracurricular activities as the information they would like to see in the future.

Fig. 4 Parent Rate the Most Important Communication Features Post-Study

When asked to rate the information parents valued most receiving about their child, post-study the answers changed dramatically. 10% responded the short stories/anecdotes, 10% information about materials, 10% responded information about the course of the day and 70% responded photos of their child. Parents did not mention curriculum, which 50% of parents
considered important pre-study. Pre-study only 30% stated they valued photos of the children the most. Post-study, after receiving photos through the Transparent Classroom, 70% of parents now stated that photos were the most important information they received about their child. 10% of parents also mentioned anecdotes and stories about their children after receiving them through the program.

Additionally, the parents commented positively on many of the features of Transparent Classroom. Overwhelmingly, parents responded that the photographs of their children working in the classroom were the best part of the Transparent Classroom experience. Many parents wrote that they enjoyed seeing a detailed description of what materials their child was working with. They also listed that the real-time updates helped them understand how their child was progressing. The parents reported that they liked that the information was in one place. They felt the program was easy to navigate and understand.

The only negatives reported were that some of the detailed descriptions of the materials were a bit technical and that the suggestions on what to do at home were not always practical. To see if the parent's actions matched the data received in the Parent Questionnaires, computer-generated results were obtained through the Transparent Classroom. This was to analyze if the parents logged in frequently and how long they used the program. The reports contained information about which materials the child was working with, curriculum notes written by the teacher, and photographs of the children working in the classroom.

The reports were updated in real time. There was some confusion on whether or not logging in through phones after a text message was recorded versus logging in on a computer or after an email notification was generated. The Transparent Classroom technicians were helpful in
deciphering the data. Parents were also helpful in demonstrating their usage and calculating the duration and frequency based on what was represented by the program. The frequency and duration the parents logged in were analyzed to determine how parents were using the information.

Field notes were kept in order to record the number of times parents inquired or commented about the Montessori Method or the daily activities of the classroom. During the first week parents inquired or commented about the Montessori Method five times, four times in week two, three times in week three, and eight times in the final week. Parents inquired or
commented about the daily activities of the classroom with greater frequency, with twelve times in week one, eight times in week two, ten times in week three and fifteen times in the final week. During the final week of the study, a parent came inquired about the difference between the Red Rods and the Number Rods. Another parent overheard and joined the conversation. This lead to a spontaneous explanation and demonstration of the materials that most likely would not have occurred without the implementation of the Transparent Classroom.

Although there is no data to concretely support this theory, it is believed that after the implementation of the Transparent Classroom parent inquiries and comments increased dramatically. Unfortunately, no data was collected pre-study in order to prove any positive effect that may have occurred.

Fig. 6 The Frequency and Duration of Parent Logins
The frequency and duration of parent logins were analyzed from data collected from the Transparent Classroom and parent interviews. Although initially parent information was not recorded when they logged in from a text notification or email received on their phone, information was still obtained through logins from computers. Parents also reported their estimated usage in an effort to ensure the accuracy of the information obtained from the Transparent Classroom. This information was averaged for ease of interpreting the data. Parents logged in an average eight times week one, twelve times week two, fourteen times week three, and ten times during the final week. On average, parents logged in fifteen minutes per login week one, seven minutes week two, three minutes week three, and six minutes each login during the final week. It should be noted that the fourth week was Valentine’s week and the school was closed Friday of that week for President’s Day weekend. These two factors could have contributed to the increase in duration of the time parents spent per login (looking at Valentine’s photos) and the decline in the number of logins (one less day of notifications). It would also appear that during week one parents were still learning to navigate the program. It could also be argued that the newness of the program could have been a factor. Parents were not asked about either scenario, so this theory cannot be proven.

Through the field notes detailing interactions with parents, there was a correlation between the duration and frequency of logins and the number of questions or comments parents made about the Transparent Classroom. It was also interesting to note that despite the incredibly positive response to the Transparent Classroom, parents mentioned that they did not want to lose face to face communication with a teacher. Therefore, there is a need for more studies and
perhaps professional development on communication strategies and incorporating them in conjunction with online record keeping programs.

**Action Plan**

The results of the research clearly show that parents value the information they receive from the Transparent Classroom. They became more engaged in the daily activities and asked questions about Montessori Theory. It seems the Transparent Classroom is indeed an effective online record-keeping program on Montessori parent appreciation.

After obtaining the results of this study, I have decided to continue using the Transparent Classroom as my record-keeping tool for my classroom. Before I began my research, I was using very little technology in the school and did all of my record keeping by hand. I have used online record keeping programs in the past. However, the information was not accessible to the parents. I could record lessons. But, it was tedious, and it was a time consuming and ineffective process. Parents would come in twice a year for a conference. They did not have explanations of the lessons or materials at their fingertips. Now, they can look up explanations, complete with photographs if they want to know more about their child's daily activities. This has led to a deeper appreciation of the Montessori Method.

Record-keeping and parent communication are much easier for me. In the past, I would keep an attendance book and a clipboard to make notes throughout the day. Now, I can keep an iPad with me and enter in lessons and take photos throughout the day. At drop-off and pick-up times, parents can sign their children in and out on the iPad. All enrollment and immunization records are also now on the Transparent Classroom making everything easy to access. Student allergies, birthdays, and authorized adults are all a click away. As I continue using this program, I will
continue to grow more comfortable with the system. I will learn how to run more reports. A nice feature with this program is that if you find you would like to use the program for a specific purpose or there is a feature you need, you can contact the company, and they will try to design it to fit your needs. The preloaded features are very user-friendly, and I have used many of the online tutorials to help learn more about the program. Record keeping is taking much less time than it did before. I imagine it will only improve as I continue to learn how to use features and develop new ways to use the program.

The results of the parent questionnaires have affected the way parents receive information about their children. The results showed that parents wanted to see photographs of their children working with the materials throughout the day. To meet that need, I now try to take a few photos each work period and send them through the Transparent Classroom. It is an efficient way for me to record my observations about the children's work and levels, while also communicating this information with the parents at the same time. The Transparent Classroom has a feature that allows you to "tag" each piece of material that a child is working on within the photographs. I do not have to go back and enter that lesson in the system. Parents can see their child working with a piece of material and then read about the lesson and the theory behind it.

In the future, I will continue to use the Transparent Classroom. I will use it for registration, classroom planning, and making materials when determining what is needed. It will be nice to have this resource to use at the beginning of the year. Planning and material making will be a more efficient process. Parents will have time to become familiar with the materials and theory. Orientation has the potential to be a much more productive time. Parents may ask more informed questions. They may introduce new topics to other parents. For new parents, I could present the
Transparent Classroom, and its’ features. Veteran parents may need a quick refresher. It would be a useful presentation for all parents that would hopefully lead to a future deeper appreciation of the daily activities of the classroom and Montessori Method.

Because the study showed such positive results, I think the research will continue to improve parent appreciation in the classroom. I now know more about what parents value seeing and hearing about their children. I plan to focus on and use that information in the future. I will also continue to try to improve face-to-face communication with parents because all of the newfound information leads to parent questions and increased comments about daily activities and the Montessori Method.

There are a few possible impacts this research may have on student learning. If parents are more informed, appreciate the daily activities of the classroom, and have a deeper understanding of the Montessori Method their children should benefit from such parental aptitude. Parents will be able to more effectively support the work of the classroom if they understand what that work actually is. The children's home life may change based on what parents learn. If parents develop an appreciation of the Montessori Method, they may change detrimental home habits in favor of more positive parenting approaches that are more in line with what happens in the classroom. The positive impact of a deeper appreciation of what children do in their classes each day could benefit the students, the parents, the teacher, the school, and ultimately, the community.

Future research could include the impact on the teacher with an increased appreciation of classroom activities due to online record keeping programs and any detrimental effects of parents’ real-time awareness of presentations being made.
Appendix 1
Parent Conversation Form

Do you feel you understand what happens in the classroom each day?

Do you feel like you have a working or basic knowledge of the Montessori Method?

Do you feel as though you understand presentations and why they are given?

Do you like how you receive information about your child’s progress in the classroom?

Do you have any current questions or concerns?

Appendix 2
Parent Questionnaire- Pre-Study

Pre-Study
Do you feel you have a clear understanding of the daily activities in the classroom? Yes No
Do you feel you have a basic knowledge of Montessori theory? Yes No
Do you feel like you can easily communicate with the teacher? Yes No

How do you feel about the current methods of communication at The Montessori School of Memphis?
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What information do you most value receiving about your child? (ex: materials they are working with, classroom curriculum, how their day went, photos).
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Please rate the formats of information from best (1) to worst (5).
_____ Short stories/anecdotes about your child
_____ List and descriptions of materials your child is using
_____ Photographs of your child in the classroom
_____ Portfolio of child work
_____ Progress reports

What do you feel could strengthen parent-teacher communication at The MSoM?
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Please list any additional comments or thoughts here.
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix 3
Parent Questionnaire- Post Study

Post-Study
1. Do you feel you have a clearer understanding of the daily activities in the classroom?  
   Yes No
2. Do you feel you have a basic knowledge of Montessori theory?  
   Yes No
3. Do you feel like you can easily communicate with the teacher?  
   Yes No
4. Do you feel that Transparent Classroom is an effective tool to improve communication between parents and teacher?  
   Yes No
5. Do you feel that after using the Transparent Classroom your understanding of the Montessori Method has increased?  
   Yes No
6. Do you feel the individual information on your child's progress and weekly activities helped you feel more engaged in your child's education?  
   Yes No
7. How do you feel about the use of the Transparent Classroom at The Montessori School of Memphis?
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
8. What information did the Transparent Classroom provide that was most important?
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
9. What information did you desire that was not met through Transparent Classroom capabilities?
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________________
10. Please rate the formats of information from best (1) to worst (5).
    _____ Short stories/anecdotes about your child
    _____ List and descriptions of materials your child is using
    _____ Photographs of your child in the classroom
    _____ Portfolio of child work
    _____ Progress reports

11. What did you like most about the Transparent Classroom?
    ____________________________________________________________________________________
    ____________________________________________________________________________________
    ____________________________________________________________________________________

12. Please list any additional comments or thoughts here.
    ____________________________________________________________________________________
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AMI Primary Training, Montessori Training Center of St. Louis, Dr. Annette Haines, trainer, 2004-2006.


URL: http://chickadeemontessori.blogspot.com/2015/03/beyond-transparent.html


