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Effects of Social/Emotional Lessons in an Elementary Montessori Environment

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**Abstract**

This action research project was completed to test the impact of a series of lessons centered around empathy and building social skills on the students and community of a Montessori elementary classroom. The setting was a suburban school in a classroom of 15 children ages six to nine. The students were primarily Caucasian and coming from middle class families. Data was collected using a tally sheet, observational field notes, a series of journal prompts and a pre/post survey. Both Grace and Courtesy lessons and storytelling sessions were part of the intervention plan. The children participated in a variety of ways including role playing, discussions, and story sharing. The results showed that the lessons did improve the interactions between the children as well as the feelings of community. The children developed a common language and skills to more positively navigate difficult interactions.

*Keywords:* Social/Emotional Development, Grace and Courtesy, Storytelling, Elementary

## **Introduction**

The elementary child is very socially minded and group oriented. Much of the most critical development which happens at this stage of life is social emotional development. In support of this heightened developmental period for emotions, elementary children have a great emotional capacity. It is this capacity which helps emotional development to occur by giving the child the space to experiment. Through navigating the depths of their emotions children can learn how to control their actions in even the most heightened situations. Children develop tendencies at this stage which will become ingrained habits for life. Therefore, it is vital that special attention is paid to the social and emotional growth of elementary children.

In order to be successful in life people need to learn to navigate social situations. The ever-changing workforce requires people to be cooperative, innovative, and resourceful. People need to be prepared to work with others to solve problems; even ones we cannot imagine today. People have no idea what the world will look like when the children of today enter the world as young adults. Therefore, it is the responsibility of educators to prepare them uncertainty by teaching them adaptively and cooperation.

Becoming a fully socially developed individual means being able to live and work peacefully in a community. The skills of compassion and altruism make those communities flourish. When a community consists of people who can indeed depend on one another everyone gets what they need, even if they do not receive entirely the same things.

If children can learn the value of this reality at a young age, their skills can follow them into adulthood and have lasting positive effects on their entire life. Developing

these effects can be done by building a classroom, or micro-society, in which everyone is given care and support.

In the micro-society of my classroom, I noticed a pattern of negativity, defensiveness, and spite. I observed that some children would ask a classmate to stop a behavior many times before they finally would or the child would become so frustrated they would begin to yell at the child who would not stop. I also observed that the children were quick to raise their voices at each other and would often use a negative tone of voice when interacting with one another. All of these behaviors escalated small misunderstandings into massive conflicts. Poor habits were beginning to develop.

More often than not, a lack of understanding another's perspective was the root of the issue. My children were not considering the needs of others and focused only on their outlook and desires. My classroom community was not very supportive or understanding. I knew the community could improve to most benefit the children and their developing social skills and personalities.

I chose to explore how to best support my children in the healthy development of their social and emotional skills which would then lead to a more positive classroom community. Exploring empathy and altruism was the path I chose to achieving that goal. To build prosocial behaviors, I needed to draw the awareness of the children to the needs and perspectives of others to draw on their empathic responses. This study examined the effects of an emotional training plan to address the problem of lack of a peaceful, positive community through building prosocial behaviors.

The training consisted of Grace and Courtesy lessons and storytelling sessions. Grace and Courtesy lessons are a means of conveying appropriate behaviors in a variety

of social situations. They are fun and engaging for the children which draws their attention and increases their awareness of negative behaviors while modeling positive behaviors. Through modeling appropriate responses in this way the children would begin to enact those behaviors opposed to the negative ones often observed.

Storytelling sessions are also fun and engaging for the children. Sharing personal experiences can assist the children in beginning to appreciate the perspectives of others while realizing they are often different from their own.

This study took place in a private school setting with a classroom size of 15 students ranging between first and third grade. The school is located in a suburb of a metro area in the Midwest. The participants have needs ranging from anxiety, hyperactivity, impulse control, and selective mutism. The participants were primarily Caucasian with a few Asian students. There were a large number of children who came from lower-income households receiving tuition assistance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Montessori Method, a subset of Constructivist Theory, was the framework for this study. Constructivism is a learning theory which proposes that humans build knowledge from their experiences (Sutinen, 2008). The Montessori Method falls under Constructivism principals. It states that the child will move about their environment and in doing so will construct themselves and their intellect. The prepared adult supports the learner to make their discoveries and to take on the responsibility of their learning. It emphasizes the importance of the hand acting as the child's means to transform their environment resulting in the construction of her intellect (Elkind, 2003).

In Dr. Maria Montessori's educational method are identified four unique stages a person goes through as they develop. These stages are called the four planes of development. They include the first plane (birth – 6 years), the second plane (6 – 12 years), the third plane (12 – 18 years), and the fourth plane (18 – 24 years). Each developmental plane is defined by the age of the children, but more importantly by the shared characteristics of all children in any particular plane. As all the children pass through each plane, they share naturally occurring characteristics. In *The Absorbent Mind*, Dr. Montessori wrote, "The child's development follows a path of successive stages of independence, and our knowledge of this must guide us in our behaviour towards him" (Montessori, 1949, p. 257). By understanding and respecting a child's changing needs as they pass through each unique plane, adults can create purposeful learning environments which best support the child's natural development and construction of themselves.

This study was conducted in a Montessori environment by a Montessori trained teacher. All of the interventions used were direct techniques, or adaptations of techniques, typically used in the environment. The sequence and intensity of the intervention lessons were designed to emphasize a need in the community. This need was made clear by the actions of the children throughout the year and by the theory itself.

The children in the current study are in the second plane of development. Dr. Montessori's theory states that children in the second plane of development share a set of characteristics including social inclination, development of morality, reasoning mind, powerful imagination, drawn to humor, and herd instinct among others.

Many of these characteristics informed the current study, particularly the emphasis on moral development in the second plane. As the child becomes capable of abstract thought and reasoning, she wants to use it to make her own decisions. Dr. Montessori wrote,

"A second side of education at this age concerns the child's exploration of the moral field, discrimination between good and evil. He no longer is receptive, absorbing impressions with ease, but wants to understand for himself, not content with accepting mere facts. As moral activity develops he wants to use his own judgment, which often will be quite different from that of his teachers" (To Educate the Human Potential, 1947, p. 4).

The second plan child is working to build their morality and understand its complexity for themselves.

In combination, the second plane child also has the capacity for a great depth of empathy. The period of empathetic strength supports the child in her exploration, and ultimately understanding, of morality through experimentation with thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others. This study draws upon the empathetic strength of second plane children.

Both Grace and Courtesy lessons and storytelling are a crucial element of the Montessori Method. Grace and Courtesy lessons designed for the second plan child have elements of storytelling which often include acting and humor as the children have the opportunity to act out various scenarios. In this study, the Grace and Courtesy lessons included all of these elements. Montessori Method supports this approach because the activities meet the characteristics of the second plane child. Storytelling also supports the

second plane child's characteristics through utilizing their imaginations and drawing upon their reasoning minds. Stories provide a groundwork for much of the work done in elementary, including social and emotional work. For this reason, a storytelling element was chosen as part of the intervention.

The second plane child utilizes their imagination, abstract thought, and morality to develop a sense of responsibility to one's self and others. The children meet their responsibility to others through assisting the community (both school community and larger communities they are a part of) and responding to the needs of those around them.

Though a developing sense of morality and a deep capacity for empathy, the children can feel a great responsibility to their immediate communities; including the people who comprise it. The desire to act prosocially can be drawn out in these children due to their heightened capacities in these areas.

Therefore, the implementation of empathy training at this crucial stage of development can provide results for the lasting effects of high levels of prosocial behavior and empathy. Montessori Method states that second plane children should be guided through this stage of development with an increased emphasis in these areas because they are naturally inclined to explore them. The theory informed my research by highlighting the second plane child's sensitivity to pro-social behavior and altruistic motivations, encouraged at this stage of development children can have lasting inclinations toward prosocial behavior for life.

### **Literature Review**

Our world is becoming increasingly interconnected through technology and globalization, and yet people feel growing isolation from one another. People see the

violence and injustice brought about against humanity daily. People are often unhappy with the way humanity treats itself. Peace and support are often hard to come by. Maria Montessori often spoke of peace in her work with young children. She believed peace and the correction of systemic injustice comes through the children. It is through the children's compassion and empathy for one another that the world could make lasting change for the better (Montessori, 1949).

Empathy plays a vital role in helping to combat these many issues facing our world today. Empathetic people feel strongly for the people suffering around them and often desire to offer support or elicit change. Supporting the growth of empathy in the early years of childhood is the best way to develop this critical personal characteristic (Masterson & Kersey, 2013).

The full development of empathy is important in allowing the students to understand the emotions and perspectives of each other, display prosocial behavior, and understand the value of peace (Sagkal, Turnuklu, & Totan, 2012). It is through empathy that we can hope to cultivate peace and build stronger communities. Children can develop lifelong emotional skills, such as empathy, in childhood which will significantly support their success in life. Therefore, it is important for educators to pay special attention to fostering these skills in their students.

### **Empathy**

The body of literature defines empathy as a complex cognitive construct which develops to process the perceived feelings of another. Hoffman (2000) defines empathy as a social cognitive ability related to taking part in the suffering of other people.

Empathy relies on the ability to recognize another's perspective as different than one's

own (Deutsch, 2006). Young children are unable to understand differing perspectives until their cognition develops to a level of considering the thoughts of others. Very young children are not thinking abstractly enough to realize that other people have thoughts and perspectives of their own. Therefore, the research found that empathy develops as the child grows and develops these cognitive abilities.

People must first recognize differing perspectives before achieving empathetic responses. Ornaghi, Brockmeier, & Grazzani recognized perspective taking an essential part of empathic emotion. They write, "...empathy is made up of a cognitive dimension involving the capacity to see things from the perspective of others and an effective dimension that involves sharing other people's emotions, as in the case of emotional contagion" (2014, p 27). Children can begin to recognize that their emotions are often directly related to another's. When they see a classmate begin to cry they can feel similar sadness. Children can feel fear because of a dangerous event which happened to a friend (Ornaghi, Brockmeier, & Grazzani, 2014). People can have powerful emotional reactions to occurrences which did not directly happen to them. Through empathizing, another's emotional state becomes one's own.

However, a person can understand and identify another person's emotional state without empathy. A person can learn to identify emotions through body language and social cues. This process is called sympathy. Sympathy is like empathy in that it considers the emotions of another, but it is only the consideration and not the shared experience. By comparison, empathy is the ability to experience another's emotions vicariously (Zajdel, Bloom, Fireman & Larson, 2013). Empathy is a deeper connection to another person through sharing their emotional state, not just assuming that a person will

be sad when their mother dies, but actually feeling it with them. It is through empathy that people, including children, can choose to engage in prosocial behavior.

### **Relationship Between Empathy and Prosocial Behavior**

Prosocial behavior as defined by Spivak & Farran is "voluntary actions intended to benefit another" (p 623, 2012). When people feel empathy for another, they are often compelled to act in a certain way, dependent upon the emotion they are enduring. Empathy evokes compassion, the desire to help someone in need. For example, if a person identifies frustration in another and feels it along with them, they may feel compelled to offer assistance. This action of assisting for another person's benefit is prosocial behavior.

Empathy and compassion, however, are not the only motivation through which a person may act pro-socially. A person may act pro-socially out of avoidance of future guilt for not helping, out of mere pity, or out of fear that they could one day be in the same situation and need someone to return the favor. Although the result of each of these situations is largely the same, the motivation is quite different. These motivations are not altruistic in nature. They serve the person providing the action in some way. Empathy leading to compassion is the purest route for repeated prosocial behavior because it is altruistic in origin. Empathy is, therefore, "the predecessor of prosocial cognitions and behaviors" (Robinson III & Curry, 2005).

As the predecessor of prosocial behavior, increasing empathy is key to increasing prosocial behavior. Many studies have proven the effectiveness of interventions which focus on empathic skills in increasing prosocial behaviors. (Masterson & Kersey 2013; Sagkal, Turnuklu, & Totan, 2012; Ornaghi, Brockmeier & Grazzani 2013; Upright 2002).

These studies are further discussed in the following sections.

### **Benefits of an Empathy Emphasis on Community**

Communities flourish when people are willing to help each other. A classroom community is no different. When children are aware of each other's needs and become responsive to them, everyone in the community benefits. Empathy enables the child to understand another's perspective and understand that another's emotions may be different from their own. Through this first step toward empathic response, a child can begin to build the skills required to navigate social situations and be a part of successful communities throughout their life.

Furthermore, altruism is the action of empathy (Masterson & Kersey, 2013). This action takes root in experience which adults can foster through some strategies Masterson & Kersey layout. Including the following: adults can encourage the natural generosity of the children which can lead to their increased self-confidence that they can make a difference. Adults can promote problem-solving through discussions leading to group decisions. Adults can foster play because through play children's prosocial behavior increases through opportunities for interaction and builds empathy sensitivity. Lastly, explore other perspectives through multicultural interactions and experiences and service opportunities. (Masterson & Kersey, 2013).

Through opportunities like these children can gain the experience needed to build an empathy mindset and more positivity interact with the people in their community (Masterson & Kersey, 2013). Many of these strategies involve modeling empathy characteristics for the children. Modeling is more effective than directly teaching empathy because it allows the children to examine life realistically (Upright, 2002).

A study on increasing empathy skills through a peace education program found that acquiring empathy skills decreases violent behavior, increased cooperation and prosocial behavior, and improved positive conflict resolutions. Increased empathy has a positive effect on the community at large by assisting the children in understanding other's emotions and perspectives to know best how to act in various situations (Sagkal, Turnuklu, & Totan, 2012).

### **Practicing Grace and Courtesy in a *Practice Society***

In an elementary Montessori environment, the children are expected to contribute to their community. Contribution not only includes the care for the environment and materials within it but also for the people who make it up. Maria Montessori wrote extensively about children gaining cognitive and social independence in the second plane of development. As they develop this independence, they desire to practice the skills of Grace and Courtesy. Montessori wrote of the practice society, or classroom community, within which they could hone their skills. The children have a responsibility to one another within their constructed practice society (Montessori, 1948). Practice societies provide a safe space for children to experiment with emotional skills and build a community in which they all can develop both academically and emotionally.

The concept of a practice society involves two main ideas. The first: that the children have not yet mastered working effortlessly in a society. They will need a lot of work, guidance, and intentional efforts toward building a community within which they can work and thrive. Secondly: a society is one of friendly association with others in which work is done, and people feel valued and respected. As elementary children gain cognitive and social independence, they need to practice how to function within their

practice society. Grace and Courtesy lessons provide the keys for how to behave pro-socially and the practice society offers the opportunity to practice (Hunkek-Stone, 2015).

Hunkek-Stone defines Grace and Courtesy as, "...figuring out what is appropriate to a particular situation and then behaving accordingly" (p 96, 2015). Grace and Courtesy, when done in a way which supports the characteristics of the second plane child (age six to twelve), furthers children's capacity for empathy and prosocial behavior. The children are now able to use their powerful imaginations and reasoning minds to imagine situations which have not yet happened and place themselves into the perspectives of others. The group lessons provide opportunity work interactively and have a strong emphasis on justice and fairness, especially when involving conflicts and personal interactions. (Hunkek-Stone, 2015).

The body of research supports the effectiveness of Grace and Courtesy lessons in fostering positive classroom communities. Thoughtfully implemented Grace and Courtesy lessons will increase the number of independently resolved conflicts while also reducing the number of conflicts which arise (Andrews, 2017; Friesen, 2018; Gregoire, 2017). Grace and Courtesy lessons also increase the use of positive language throughout a conflict (Gregoire, 2017). Grace and Courtesy lessons support the children in learning strategies for conflict resolution (Andrews, 2017). When children can interact with one another in a constructive way the overall community benefits and prosocial behavior increases.

### **Storytelling Supports Community and Emotional Development**

The body of literature supports the effectiveness of storytelling in deepening children's awareness of other's perspectives. As mentioned previously, this skill is an

essential component in people's ability to empathize fully. Storytelling provides opportunities for children to practice the process of considering another person's position. The children can write the stories, or the adult can offer them. The stories can be discussed or acted out to practice perspective taking. Storytelling is done in a variety of ways, but each provides an opportunity to develop foundational skills for emotional development needed for lifelong success.

Upright (2002) used an oral storytelling strategy to develop empathic skills in children. She chose appropriate stories involving a moral dilemma to discuss with small groups of elementary children. The discussion leads to debates about the "correct" decision the characters should make while heightening the children's awareness of a variety of perspectives. As the children in the members of the discussion disagreed about how the characters should act they were practicing listening, understanding, and respecting the ideas of their fellow classmates. In this study, the disagreement is what brings about the opportunity to practice these skills (Upright, 2002).

Ornaghi, Brockmeier & Grazzani (2013) created a training program designed to train children in emotional understanding, theory of mind, and empathy through a conversational approach. Over two months, the researchers conducted short sessions with six and seven-year-olds in which the researcher would read a short scenario story or emotional script and have a conversation with the children following. The conversation would target the nature, causes, and regulation of emotions throughout the various scenarios. The study found that the training proved to have significant gains in the children's emotional understanding, theory of mind, and empathy levels which sustained over six months.

A study done in a preschool environment examined the effects of storytelling and dramatization on the social emotional development of the children along with the community building aspects of the storytelling activity. The children had the opportunity to tell a story aloud while an adult would dictate. Then the child could choose other children to act out the recorded scene. Through this activity, the children were able to build social emotional skills through taking on the role of a character. Storytelling also proved to be effective in community building through the positive interactions between the participating children (Wright, Diener & Kemp, 2012).

Gainer & Valdez-Gainer (2017) did a similar study with elementary children. The researchers implemented a storytelling and story acting (STSA) curriculum through which the children would write stories and act them out as a group. Through these interactions, the children engaged in discussions about the motivations and actions of the characters. The children considered why a character might act or feel a certain way. The discussion surrounding the storytelling provided perspective taking practice.

### **Current Research**

The body of research delves deeply into emotional development for children. The research highly supports the correlation between increased empathy and increased prosocial behaviors. The research explores the effect of programs which directly teach children emotional understanding and empathic skills. The studies show that children are positively affected when adults encourage their prosocial behaviors. Individual emotional development, community environment, and academics are all benefited by an increase in prosocial behavior.

The literature thoroughly explores how preschool age children develop their

emotional understandings and how to best support that development. There is some research studying the significance of emotional training for older children, but this research is often done on a large scale with a very scientific approach. Many of the studies focus on training in emotional understanding conducted over several months (Ornaghi, Brockmeier, & Grazzani, 2014).

Due to the lack of research on the impact of emotional training on elementary age children in a smaller setting, such as a single classroom, with an emphasis on perspective taking, there is a need for more research. When children assume that their perspective is the only possibility they often misunderstand situations and conflicts arise.

My research focus is the impact of a series of Grace and Courtesy lessons and storytelling sessions on prosocial behavior and a sense of community. This emotional training centers around increasing awareness of another's perspective and how personal actions influence another. By exposing children to other perspectives, they should begin to identify those perspectives more readily on their own. Providing practice working through mock situations, separate from the high emotions of an actual conflict, should better prepared them to act pro-socially when future conflicts arise. Discussions throughout the intervention experiences will ideally lead to empathic responses and conversations about how to best respond when future conflicts arise. My study explores how emotional training, through Grace and Courtesy and storytelling, affected the prosocial behavior of the children and the sense of empathy in the community.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted over a series of six weeks. The environment the study took place in has 15 children nine females and six males between the ages of six years

old and nine years old. There were two adults present in the room during the data collection period. Daily data collection took place between 10:30 and 10:45 am. Each week one whole group Grace and Courtesy lesson was given. Likewise, between one and two storytelling sessions took place each week. The majority of children participated in sessions. The groups for storytelling were chosen based on availability of the children and invitation from myself.

The first week was spent on collecting baseline data. I would observe at the designated time and tally the number of occurrences of predetermined behaviors (raised voice, accusatory language, negative tone of voice, not ceasing behavior when asked). This time was chosen for observation because it was half way through the work period when many disagreements occur.

The tally sheet (Appendix A) used for collecting this data lists the fifteen participating children in order by age. A tally was made each time a child behaved in the ways described above. Notes were taken if the incident was noteworthy or if an adult needed to intervene. This tool was used to collect data in the baseline week and continued throughout the following five weeks.

At the end of the baseline week a pre-survey (Appendix B) was given to each child. Older children were given the survey to fill out individually while younger children were read aloud the questions which they answered orally, and I recorded for them. This survey included questions about the children's understanding of community and how the children perceived their community.

Throughout weeks 2 through 5 the children would be gathered on either the first or second day of the week to participate in a Grace and Courtesy lesson. Two children

were chosen each week to assist in presenting this lesson. I chose the children for this task with a few considerations in mind: compatibility with one another and the particular capability of the children to perform the task well. Children were allowed to deny participation in presenting the lesson when asked, but all were required to watch and join the discussions.

Once the children presenters were determined, we would go to a quiet location out of the environment and prepare the lesson. With the children, we would first determine the concern to address (people using negative tone of voice, people not stopping when asked to stop, extra). I wrote the concern on a white board. Then we discussed how to model this behavior in three short skits. Each skit had the same scenario, but the characters in each reacted differently. The first skit was the “wrong way” or displayed the negative behavior I wanted to call attention to. The second skit was the “medium way” or a version that was slightly better, but still not the best way to handle the situation. The third skit was the “right way” or the most appropriate way to address the situation.

For example, during week four the concern regarded negative tone of voice. The scenario was two people standing in line and a third budging in front of everyone. In the first version all people involved used negative tone of voice. In the second version only one person used negative tone of voice. In the last version all used positive tone of voice and more clearly addressed the issue. The words of the initial statement made by the character who was being budged remained the same throughout all three examples to emphasize the tone of voice as the issue instead of the language used.

Once my two volunteers and I were prepared we would call together the entire class and perform the Grace and Courtesy lesson. First, we would state the concern for

the class. Next, we performed each version of the skit. In between each skit we discussed the differences between them, how the actions made the characters feel, and if this had happened to anyone before. Once finished we stated our new class agreement, such as agreeing to use positive tone of voice as opposed to negative. Once finished, I filled out the field notes data collection tool (Appendix C) which gathered data on the engagement and response of the children. This tool included, among other things, information on participation, engagement, mood of the classroom before and after, and whether or not the language or skills presented were used on future occasions.

During the second half of weeks two through five I gave storytelling lesson(s). Some weeks two sessions were given while other weeks just one was given depending on circumstances of the week along with the number of children who participated in the first session. I ensured that at least 85% of the class participated in at least one session a week.

In these lessons I first told a story and then the children had the chance to tell a story. We had a special rock which was held by the speaker. The story I told highlighted the theme for the week and tied back to the Grace and Courtesy lesson from earlier in the week. The children could then share their own experiences regarding the theme. Through this exercise the children were able to participate in a shared experience and consider the perspectives of others. I used the field notes data collection tool (Appendix C) after to gather more data on the engagement and response of the children.

At the end of each week the children were asked to answer some journal questions (Appendix D). A few of the children gave their answers verbally which I recorded. Two questions were the same throughout the entire intervention “In my classroom community

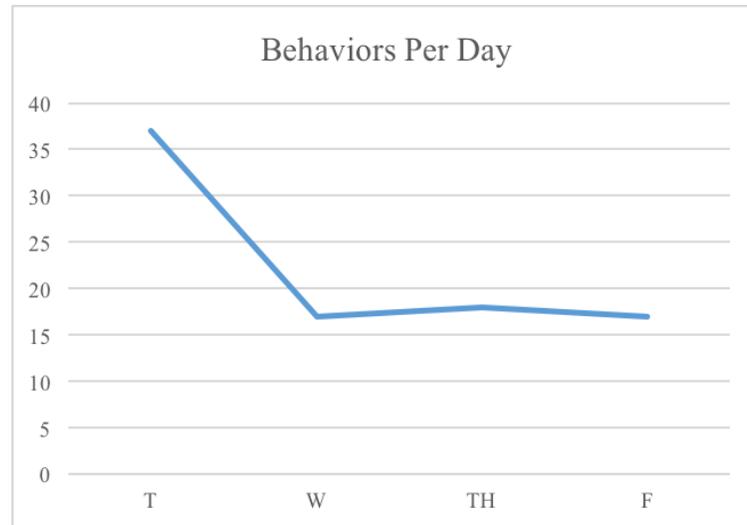
I feel...”and “When I am around my classmates I feel...” A third question was asked in weeks two through five relating to the theme of the week.

During the last week of intervention, I continued to collect data through the tally sheet and did a post survey (which was the same as the pre survey). The sixth week is where the post intervention data was collected.

### **Baseline Data**

The first week of the intervention was devoted to collecting baseline data. The first week was a four-day school week. A tally sheet was used daily to collect data on specific behaviors. These behaviors include: negative tone of voice, raised voice, and not stopping a behavior when asked. These behaviors were chosen because they were typical negative behaviors of the group which were specifically addressed in the intervention.

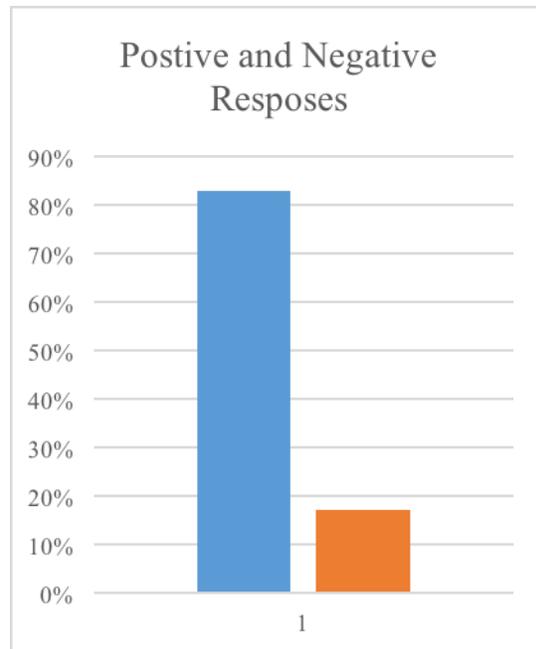
The tally sheet was designed to indicate the effectiveness of the intervention through tracking the occurrences of specific negative behaviors. On most days at least one child was missing due to illness or unforeseen circumstances. The tally sheet was used to track frequency of these behaviors. During the baseline data collection period there were 89 occurrences resulting in an average of 22.25 occurrences a day, as seen in Figure One which displays the occurrences by day.



*Figure 1.* Observed Number of Behaviors by Day of the Week (Baseline Week)

A journaling prompt was used at the end of week one. It addressed the children's feelings of working with their classmates and of being in their classroom community. This journal was used to gauge the children's feelings about their community. The children were asked two questions: how they feel when they are around their classmates and how they feel when they are in their classroom community. These questions gaged if the children felt their community was more welcoming and positive or unwelcoming and negative.

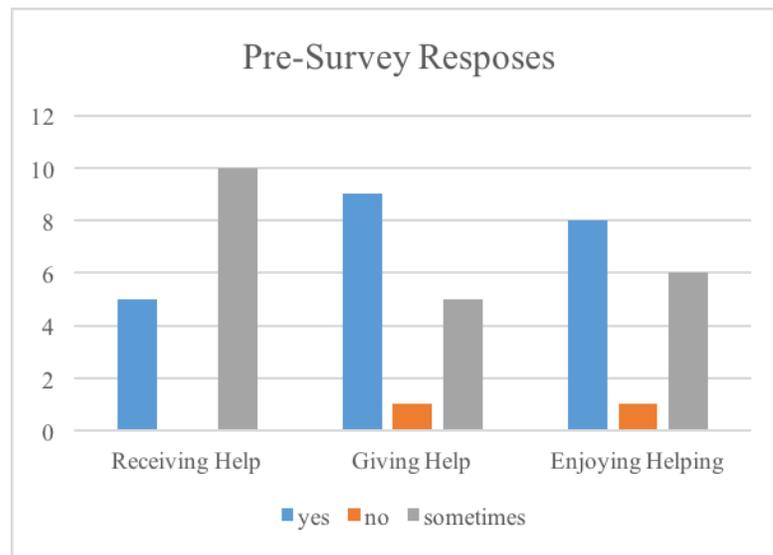
The responses were coded as either positive or negative. If a child wrote of both negative and positive feelings it was recorded in each category. Of the responses 83% were positive while 17% were negative, as can be seen in Figure Two.



*Figure 2.* Percentage of Positive and Negative Responses to Pre Survey.

Figure 2 includes data from the first journal prompt after week one. This data showed that overall the children had a fairly positive outlook on their school community. Many of the children wrote of feeling happy or welcomed in their environment. In response to a prompt about classroom community one child wrote she felt, “welcome, happy and sort of challenged.” Another wrote they felt, “Good. If everyone is focusing and I am focusing, the I feel really good!” Of the negative responses many were paired with positive ones, such as feeling, “mad and silly and unwelcome and happy.” When this was the case the responses were coded as both positive and negative. Only one child wrote of only negative experiences and feelings of unwelcomes in the classroom. This information led me to see that although the children did not always act prosocially they still felt a sense of community with each other.

During the baseline data period a pre-survey was also used. This survey measured the children's knowledge of what community is and their perception of community strength in the classroom.



*Figure 3.* Number of Responses to Pre Survey.

Figure 3 shows the responses of the first three questions in the survey. The first asked if the child needed help would the people in our class help them. 5 of the children responded yes while 10 replied sometimes. The second questions asked if the child had ever helped anyone in the class. 9 children responded yes, 1 responded no, and 5 responded sometimes. Most children identified as helpers. The third question asked if the child enjoys helping. 8 children responded yes, 1 responded no, while 6 responded sometimes. Most children felt enjoyment from helping at least some of the time.

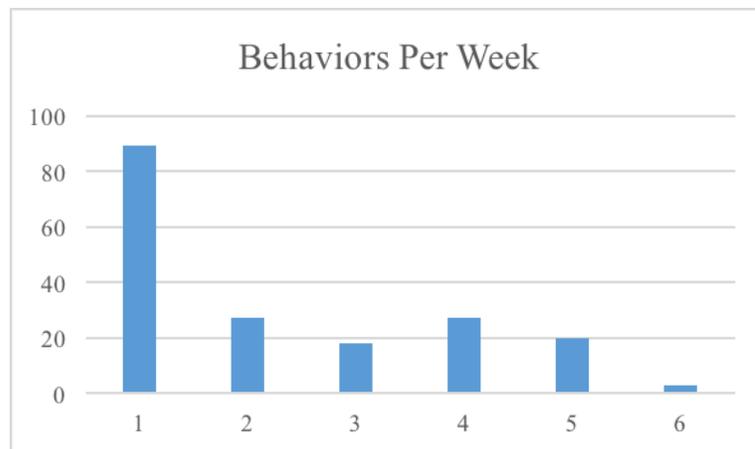
The survey also addressed the meaning of community. The children were asked to write what community means. 73% of the children's responses associated community with helping others. One child wrote, "It [community] means that we care for each other, help each other and stick together." This data shows that the children believed altruistic

acts, such as offering aid, are the foundation of community. This data from the survey also reflected that the children felt that they frequently chose to help one another and enjoyed doing so. The sense of community was present in the group.

Although there was a sense of community when directly asked, during the baseline period the children were observed to be in frequent conflict and lacking the skills to navigate those conflicts. Conflicts were heated and driven by emotion and personal desires. The children felt and desired a sense of community but were not always able to act as a community. It was clear that the children needed the skills to speak to each other in a positive and constructive way.

### Data Analysis

Data was collected using the tally sheets throughout the intervention and post interventions. The intervention was four weeks and the post intervention lasted one week.



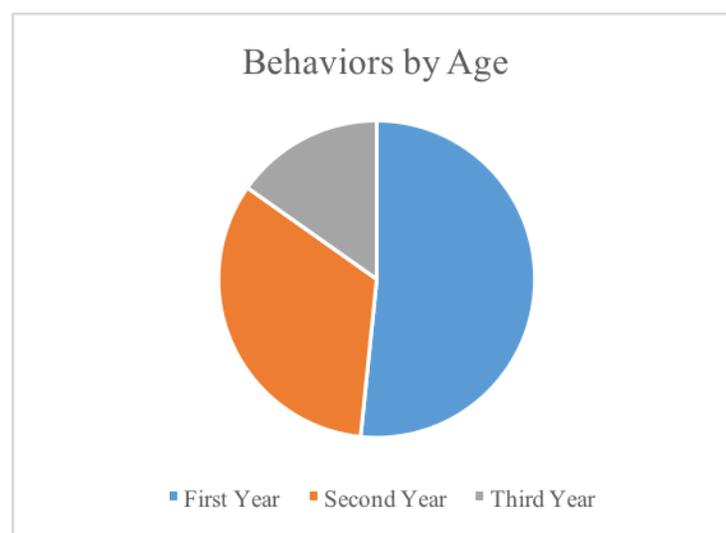
*Figure 4.* Number of recorded behaviors between 10:30-10:45. Data is organized by week.

Figure 4 shows a clear decline in observed behaviors between 10:30 am and 10:45am. In week one, the four day baseline week, there were 89 occurrences averaging in 22.25 a day. In week two there were 27 occurrence averaging out to 5.4 per day. In

week three, a four-day week, there were 18 occurrences averaging out to 4.5 per day. In week four there were 27 occurrences again. In week five there were 20 occurrences averaging to 4 a day. In the post intervention week there were only 3 occurrences the entire week during the specific time frame. The averages are all notably lower than the baseline average of 22.25 occurrences per day.

The children were observed to act more and more peaceably throughout each week. They were reminded by adults, and by each other, of the stories and lessons regarding the behaviors addressed by the intervention. Children were observed pointing out negative tone of voice and accusatory language to each other. These reminders were the basis for reconciling disputes and supported the children through conflicts. Once the behavior was identified and agreed upon as problematic, steps were taken to change the behaviors to be more prosocial. Compared to the base line period, the children spent less time in conflict each week during the observation period and nearly no time in conflict the last week.

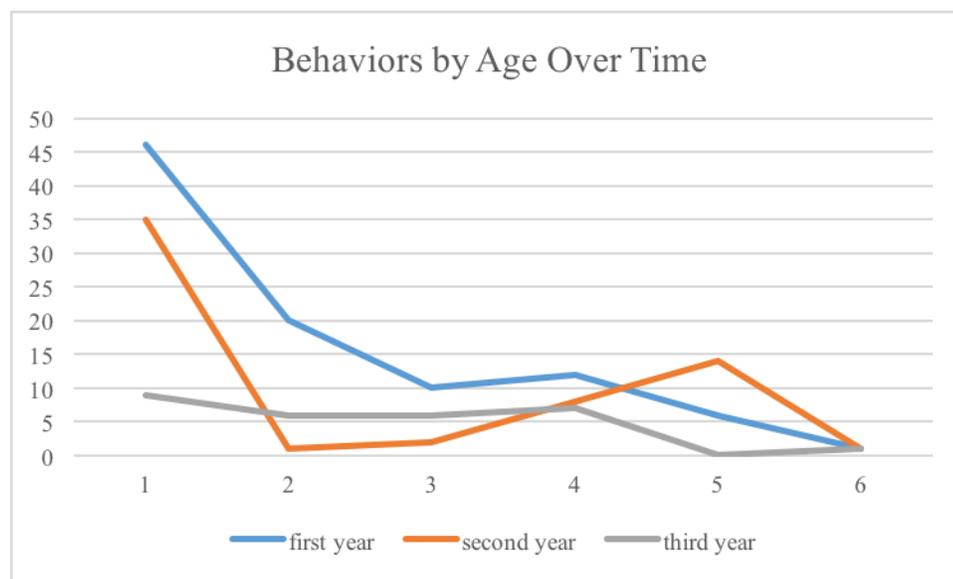
The behaviors of the children analyzed by age can be seen in figure six.



*Figure 6.* Percentage of behaviors by age group.

The majority of the negative behaviors recorded were those of first year children (age 6 or 7). This data was not surprising because the youngest children often have the least control of their emotions and choices relatively. They are still learning the skills of living and working in a social community. When in Children's House the previous year they were not asked to work in social groups nearly as often. Working in social groups inevitably cause conflict. Now that they are asked to do so they need to build those skills quickly.

Over time the negative behaviors of all groups of children decreased considerably. By week six the data shows that each age group had relatively the same amount of observed behaviors, as can be seen in Figure 7.



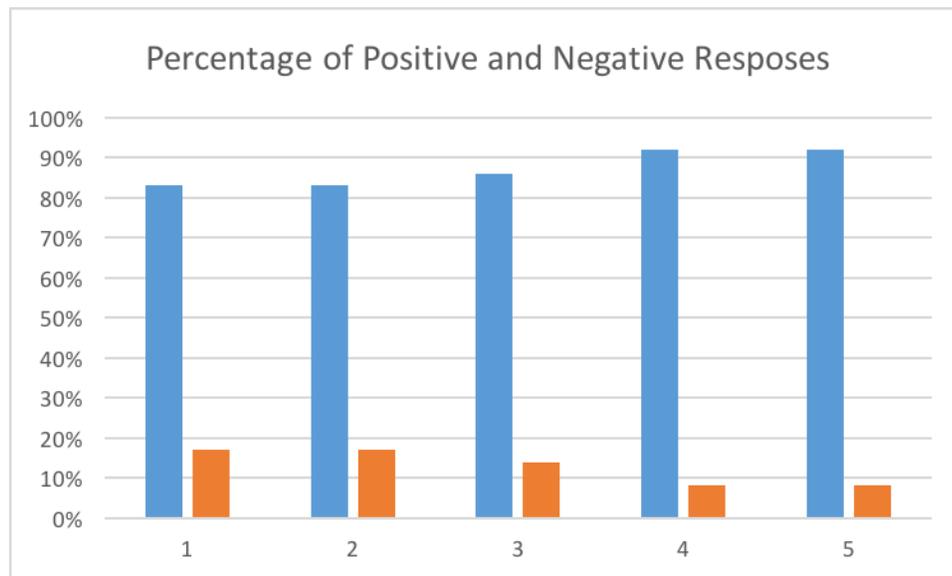
*Figure 7.* Number of recorded behaviors over six-week period divided by age.

However, the comparative number of children who identified as helpers or felt positivity toward their community was not reflective of age like the behaviors recorded above. There were nearly equal amounts of children who answered positively and

negatively to surveys and journal entries from each age group. This was interesting because although the first year group showed the most negative behaviors they did not also feel the most negative about their community. They have the capacity to act volatily and still feel welcome and happy at school.

There were two first year children who stood out in particular. These children accounted for a large amount of the data collected on the tally sheets, 47%, due to large emotional outbursts. Yet these children expressed very positive and cheerful feelings about their school and community.

Journal prompts were given at the end of each week of the intervention. The same baseline questions were given along with one rotating question regarding the children's value and understanding of the weekly topic.

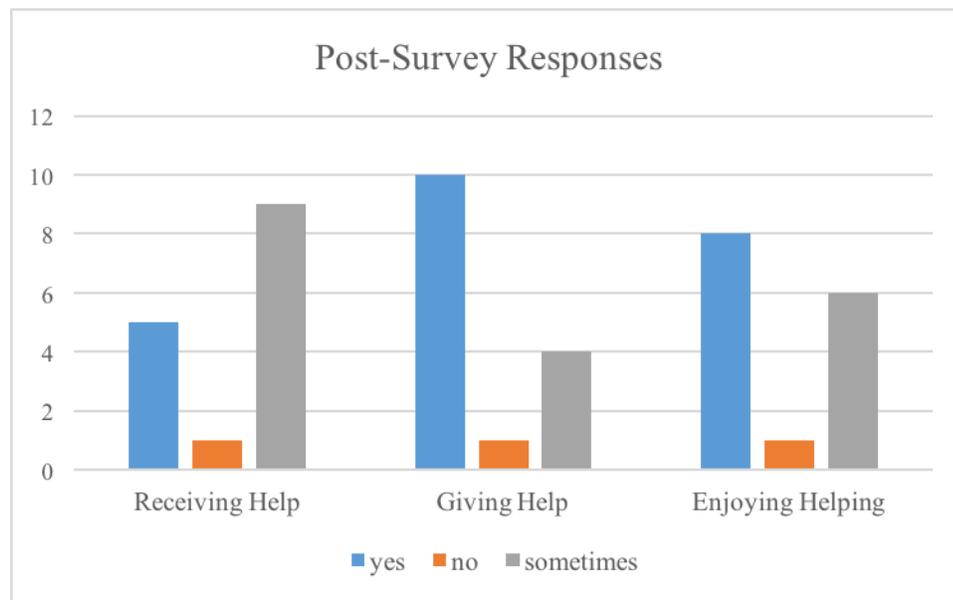


*Figure 8.* Percentage of positive and negative responses to journal prompts.

Figure 8 shows the percentages of journal responses which were positive verses those which were negative. The positive responses increased from 83% to 92% while the

negative decreased from 17% to only 8%. The negative responses were cut nearly in half compared to the baseline data point of 17%. The children felt overwhelmingly positive about their classroom and community.

A post-survey was given to the children at the end of week six. This survey was the same as the pre-survey given at the end of week one.



*Figure 9.* Responses to each question in the post survey.

As can be seen in Figure 9, the children primarily answered yes and sometimes to the questions. The results were almost identical to the pre-survey. This showed that the sense of community which was present in the beginning stayed in tact and echoed the data above of a present sense of community in the group.

Observations by myself also confirmed that the children had a sense of community with each other. They were observed offering and receiving help from one another frequently. One such example is when a child was disappointed about work spots

in the classroom and another child noticed the distress and offered condolence and assistance finding a spot near engaging work partners.

Those who answered no to some questions were observed as less likely to act prosocially but still did on many occasions. Those who answered yes to most questions were observed to offer help on a very regular basis.

The children were largely engaged in both the Grace and Courtesy lessons and the storytelling lessons. All children were required to attend the Grace and Courtesy lessons presentation. Each week two children were chosen to participate in the giving of the presentation itself for a total of eight children. A variety of ages and capabilities were chosen to assist in the presentations. Numerous children asked to be a part of the giving of the lesson before each one was prepared showing great enthusiasm in the process. The children were observed to be engaged in discussion throughout the lesson. They were raising their hands and pointing out what should and should not have been done in each scenario.

Many, but not all, children were asked to join the storytelling lessons. All children participated in at least two, but mostly three or more, storytelling lesson. Those who joined listened to the example story told by myself and had the opportunity to tell their own. Many children told their own stories. All stayed to listen. During every storytelling lesson children nearby would stop what they were doing and join the group.

After implementing the emotional training intervention in an elementary Montessori environment it seems that children are able to use experiences in lesson centered around emotional skill building to effect positive changes in their interactions with each other. The Grace and Courtesy lessons gave the children the opportunity to

explicitly see and discuss appropriate responses to the actions of people around them. Language was given to the children support suitable reactions when faced with typical problematic situations.

Storytelling lessons gave the children the opportunity to discuss their feelings and experiences in a natural setting. It gave them exposure to the reality that other people are facing the same challenges. Hearing the experience of their classmates through story gave them the perspectives of others to consider.

The children spent less time in conflict after the intervention was given. The last week of intervention nearly all negative behaviors were eliminated from the data and the majority of children felt positivity about their community. The situations depicted in the lessons gave the children the awareness of appropriate behavior. The language given in the lessons were used to help resolve and avoid conflicts. The perspectives revealed in the lessons helped the children toward empathy and compassionate responses in difficult situations.

### **Action Plan**

Working directly with children on exposing them to other's emotions and perspectives builds social/emotional skills which will benefit the children throughout their entire lives. When children have the skills and tools to navigate difficult social situations they become more empowered and confident in their ability to do so. Ideally, the number of conflicts themselves would also decrease due to an increased sense of empathy and value of the community. This study found exactly that; as the children were exposed to lessons focused on empathy and emotions, the frequency of negative behaviors resulting from conflicts decreased.

Over the six-week intervention period the number of conflicts involving negative behavior decreased drastically. The children became more peaceable and kind to each other. The children were observed to be using the language given to them in the lessons when involved in conflict. This language helped them to navigate the conflicts more compassionately and constructively. Overall, the children expressed a strong positive community feeling throughout the study.

The results of this research have really strengthened my confidence in the effectiveness of Grace and Courtesy lessons. Grace and Courtesy lessons are a staple of an Elementary Montessori environment which can often go overlooked. These foundational lessons are the great tool which Montessorians have for building and maintaining a strong feeling of community through directly teaching social skills. After closely studying the effectiveness of these lessons it has reinforced my belief in them and encouraged me to continue, and likely increase, the use of them in my teaching practice.

This study also affected my teaching in showing me the importance of having a common language with the children regarding not only academics but also classroom dynamics. After providing language in Grace and Courtesy lessons, the children began using the same phrases to identify behaviors they encountered. Using phrases such as “You are using accusatory language” or “Please say that again in a positive tone of voice” helped both adults and children alike to communicate their needs with one another. Having a common language to address these issues has really helped to navigate them in a beneficial way. I would like to build upon this new common language to address other situations with the introduction of more language in future Grace and Courtesy lessons.

This intervention has directly impacted student learning through creating a more peaceful working environment. Children are better able to concentrate when there are lesson disturbances due to conflict. Similarly, the heightened emotional state which can result from conflict is difficult to learn in. The reduction of conflict resulted in an expansion of time for productive student learning.

The children also benefited by increasing their social/emotional skills and assisted them in communicating their thoughts and needs more clearly. Part of growing and learning is to learn skills beyond academics that will benefit the child in life. Children who can interact well with others grow into adults who can do the same. This benefits not only themselves, but all those around them.

A continued study with more lessons would be an interesting potential future investigation. Perhaps focusing on other relevant social behaviors. Expanding on the role playing activities within Grace and Courtesy lessons would be interesting as well. Once given the initial presentation the children could break into groups and role play with each other to practice the skills and language directly.

Explicitly teaching what empathy means and the traits an empathic person holds could be explored as well. My study taught skills to increase prosocial behavior and empathy, but did not directly teach what empathy is. The children could benefit from understanding such an important characteristic.

An angle on this topic which I did not explore and am most curious about is how conflict was resolved. Data could be collected and studied on adult interventions, peer assistance, vs. independent resolution of individual conflicts. As the children learn how to

independently resolve or avoid conflict the number of adult interventions should go down.

The outcomes of this study proved to be very positive. The lessons impacted the children and community in an encouraging way. Through a common language and repeated exposure to the perspectives of others the classroom became a more peaceful place and our community was strengthened.

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Appendix A  
Tally Sheet for Tracking Observed Behavior Daily Between 10:30 – 10:45

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Tally marks are placed to count occurrences by each child involved in

- Accusatory language (“she stole my pencil”)
- Raised voices
- Use of negative tone
- Denied ceasing behavior when asked to stop by another child

This is filled out the same time each day. 15 minute observation

Child	Age	Talley	Total	Notes
1	6			
2	6			
3	6			
4	6			
5	7			
6	7			
7	7			
8	7			
9	8			
10	8			
11	8			
12	8			
13	8			
14	9			
15	9			

Appendix B  
Field Notes on Days of Lessons

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**Date/Time:**

**Story Theme:**

**Children Present:**

Before

What is the general mood of the classroom? Was there any conflict between children earlier in the day?

During

Describe the engagement of students?

How did the children respond to the story?

After

Did the mood the classroom change after the story?

What did the children do after the story? (Did they converse with each other? Were they directed toward work? Did they wonder?)

Was the story repeated by the children? Was it referenced during any conflict?

Other Notes

Appendix C  
Pre/Post Survey

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In the next few weeks we are going to do some lessons on storytelling focused around empathy and community. Before we begin I would like you to answer a few questions about our community. It is important when you are thinking about these questions to consider our entire class and answer as honestly as possible.

If you needed help, would the people in our class help you?

Yes                      No                      Sometimes

Have you ever helped anyone in our class?

Yes                      No                      Sometimes

Do you enjoy helping others?

Yes                      No                      Sometimes

What does community mean?

What does it mean to be part of a community?

Appendix D  
Weekly Journal Prompts

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The children will be assessed through a journal prompt on how they feel in their classroom. The children will fill out these journal prompts weekly.

**Questions for All 6 Weeks:**

In my classroom community I feel...

When I am around my classmates I feel...

**Rotating Weekly Question:**

Week 2: Why is it important to use positive language as opposed to accusatory language?

Week 3: Why is it important to use I feel statements?

Week 4: Why is it important to use a positive tone of voice when speaking to others?

Week 5: Why is it important to listen to a classmate who asks you directly to do something?