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## **Gratitude and Work Conferences in the Upper Elementary Montessori Classroom**

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Gratitude and Work Conferences in the Upper Elementary Montessori Classroom

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## Abstract

Over 100 years ago, Maria Montessori created her educational method. The Montessori philosophy of teaching is still thriving in the educational world today. This method incorporates peace, gratitude, and intrinsic motivation directly woven into the philosophy of teaching. This paper will cover three aims; (1) identify how gratitude affects students' attitude towards learning 2) how daily work conferences affect students overall work completion, and (3) examine how strong parental involvement indicates student success. This paper will provide strong reviews of the Montessori education, and how the strategies of the philosophy impact work completion within the classroom. Gratitude is heavily present in the grace and courtesy aspect of the Montessori philosophy. The school in which the study was conducted implemented a gratitude theme for the school year, this theme easily connected and carried over to the research study.

*Keywords:* gratitude, Montessori, upper elementary, work conferences, parental involvement, work completion, joyful learning

### **Motivation in the Montessori Classroom**

“The child who concentrates is immensely happy” (Montessori, 1949).

Within the Montessori classroom, intrinsic motivation is a paramount to the success of the student. According to Maria Montessori “The child who has never learned to work by himself, to set goals for his own acts, or to be the master of his own force of will is recognizable in the adult who lets others guide his will and feels a constant need for approval of others” (1949). Motivation that is not intrinsic, can have a detrimental effect on not only their skill building, but also their self-actualization, and self-esteem (Ebner, 2016). Intrinsic motivation allows students to move freely through the school day, moving from one work to the next, not because of external motivations, simply because the child knows themselves, it is the right thing to do.

Maria Montessori developed multi-age classrooms that include settings that have a three-year age span groupings (3–6-year old’s, 6–9-year old’s, 9-12-year old’s, etc.). Multi-aged classrooms give students the opportunity to become leaders in the classroom. According to the American Montessori Society (AMS), Authentic Montessori schools share the following principles and characteristics: multi-age classrooms, student choice within range of options, long blocks of uninterrupted work time. The classrooms will also share: student learning through exploration and interaction with a carefully prepared environment, specialized materials developed with Montessori principles in mind, student freedom of movement around the classroom, as well as at least one Montessori trained teacher (AMS or AMI) in each classroom. Lillard (2019), would say “I consider two intrinsic reasons why this century-old system is still relatively prevalent and unchanged: alignment with findings from developmental and educational psychology, and breadth”. A Montessori classroom is easily recognizable. The classroom is clean, organized, and children are thoroughly engrossed in their work.

Utilizing intrinsic motivation within the Montessori classroom opens up the opportunity for the students to have the most success. Motivation and gratitude, when used in conjunction with one another can allow the teacher to move the students through more curriculum at a consistent pace, due to the structure the students and the teacher share for how the classroom is ran.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Self-determination theory is the theory that “toppled the dominant belief that the best way to get human beings to perform tasks is to reinforce their behavior with rewards” (O’Hara, 2017). Self-determination theory is classified by CenterforSelfDeterminationTheory.org as “formal theory that defines intrinsic and varied extrinsic sources of motivation, and a description of the respective roles of intrinsic and types of extrinsic motivation in cognitive and social development and in individual differences. Perhaps more importantly, SDT propositions also focus on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people’s sense of volition and initiative, in addition to their well-being and the quality of their performance” (*The Theory – Selfdeterminationtheory.Org*, n.d.)

When looking at education theories that help to develop the research and understanding, self-determination theory, as well as motivation theory really work to drive these ideas of intrinsic motivation, and student engagement into focus. Developing a strong framework for the research process. Maria Montessori believed in the planes of development, and how those planes of development impacted children’s motivation levels inside and outside of the classroom. It has been stated by many sources that the method of Montessori teaching, follows the four planes of development not only allows the academic development, but also the human development.

Increasing students' motivation, can impact the way the students complete their work. Since intrinsic motivation is internal, it can become difficult to study within the confines of a classroom. Garn and Jolly (2004) described how intrinsic motivation aids in the learning process: "Learning is regulated effectively by intrinsic motivation because behavioral engagement is considered a reward in and of itself. These definitions and insights embrace the theories summarized, and key findings will show that by developing the motivation of students through various activities will not only increase their internal motivation, but it will also set the students up for success by allowing them to complete more work completed on their work plan on time.

### **Work Conferences in the Classroom**

Providing students with work conferences allows students to stay on track, get more organized, as well as allow students to see exactly where they are at as far as work goes. The goal of work conferences is to empower students to take ownership in their own education (Ebner, 2016). Work conference can be structured time for the teacher and students to sit down one on one, and look at "completed work, work in progress, joint lesson planning, and sometimes mini-lessons" (Ebner, 2016, 12). This is all done using teacher to student open and honest dialogue.

### **Gratitude in the Montessori Classroom**

Gratitude is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness" (para. 1). Gratitude is often shown by others as a response. The setting of a Montessori classroom, by nature promotes student engagement by fulfilling the four essentials of motivation in students – interest, autonomy,

relatedness, and competence (Fredricks, 2011; Murray, 2011). Callaghan (2015, p. 9), stated “Raising awareness of how adults at school support value and care for students is a key component of an effective intervention. Encouraging students’ prosocial actions such as doing kind acts and writing thank you letters, can enhance relationships”. When students engage in prosocial acts, they are motivated by feeling needed, it has been said by Froh et al. (2010) that “Gratitude, then, may aid adolescents’ development by fostering both a general sense of connectedness to others, the community and society at large as well as a motivation”. Sweeny (2015, p. 4), describes gratitude in the classroom by stating

The most convincing evidence that gratitude can improve youth well-being comes from three gratitude intervention studies. In one study (Froh et al. 2008), early adolescents instructed to count up to five things for which they were grateful (i.e., gratitude condition) reported more gratitude, optimism, and life satisfaction, as well as less negative affect, compared to those who counted things they found annoying (i.e., hassles condition).

When students experience gratitude “compared with less grateful people, grateful people report experiencing more life satisfaction, optimism, vitality, and less depression and envy” (Sweeny, 2015). Students tend to be most grateful for their basic human needs more so than ever after 9/11(Sweeny, 2015). One of the fundamental principles of an authentic Montessori classroom is following the child. Following the child allows intrinsic motivation to be developed. It included allowing the child to decide what they are ready and willing to learn, in a structured and safe environment.

In order to do this, students need to understand that they have the freedom to choose not only what they work on but also when they work on it. Maria Montessori allowed for a new way to educate students.

Using her background as a physician, and anthropology, Maria Montessori employed the skill of acute observation, and anecdotal notes to develop a radical method education, that was able to reach the masses. Through this new form of education, students learned how to focus on the process of reading through the natural language process itself. Maria Montessori was able to do this by the use of a spiral curriculum, which even still today, allows students to gain access to vocabulary in a variety of ways that remain natural to the student. Spiral curriculum allows children to be exposed to concepts several times, each time, going slightly more in depth with the concept.

Maria Montessori developed her over a century ago and used vital observations to aligns not only practices but also principles to build a child-centered educational experience. Allowing the children to be met where they are at educationally allows the child to feel more successful. When children feel successful, gratitude will follow suite. “Because gratitude acts in tandem with other positive emotions to boost well-being and success in life (Fredrickson, 2004), gratitude may have benefits that are unique to adolescents” (Froh et al., 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The work in the Upper Elementary classroom can be enhanced through the addition of one-on-one work conferences and fostering gratitude. Students who were able to meet one on one with teachers, and have time to go over expectations, tend to show more gratitude, which aligns itself to a more productive work day.

When gratitude actions and interventions are put in place, in conjunction with one-on-one work conferences, student engagement increases. This also allows students to change how gratitude is thought of. Students who engage in showing gratitude, inside and outside of the classroom have stronger engagement at school.

Engagement and gratitude enforce students need for autonomy, and having students feel as though they are able to learn in an environment that is at their own pace. Student work conferences also plays into the need for self-directed learning, while maintaining the expectations of the teacher.

### **Methodology**

The research was conducted for six weeks during January, February, and March 2022 to answer the following question: What effect do work conferences and gratitude in a Montessori classroom do to the amount of late work? The study took place in a school that has an overarching theme of gratitude. The school had a place for students to “fill someone’s bucket” sheets, that were read during morning announcements, and gratitude was incorporated in various ways throughout the school year.

The study took place in an Upper Elementary Montessori classroom in a public hybrid Montessori/traditional school. The student population consisted of 10 fourth graders and 10 fifth graders. The student make up was twelve females, and eight males. Parents were given the opportunity to decline their child be part of the study.

The intervention started as the participants had just settled back into school after winter break in January. There were three scheduled remote learning days to accommodate the increased number of Covid cases in the county. With the planned school closures, students did not have a full week of in person learning during the data collection period.

## Overview

Late work and inconsistent work progress has plagued the classroom all school year. This can still be a result of lost learning due to Covid-19 lockdowns and hybrid learning options the previous school year. The classroom looked at ways to incorporate gratitude to weigh the impact positive outlooks has on not only work completion, but also the quality of work being submitted. Gratitude is defined by Miriam Webster as “the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness” exploring how gratitude connects to late work. During the time of the research, daily Teacher-Student Conferences were held. The teacher sat beside each child individually and asked the same set of questions:

1. What did you plan for yourself today?
2. What is your goal for the day?
3. What works do you want to get done tonight?
4. What are you doing today that will set you up for success?

The questions asked centered around work that had been assigned, work that was due, and work that was already late. Students with outstanding late work, set up a plan to do homework. The teacher emailed both the parents and the students to ensure everyone was on the same page. The students had two options for work plans. The first work plan was for students who had no late work (see Appendix A), and the second work plan was for students who needed to plan their homework (see Appendix B). Data was also tracked to see when parents would respond to communication.

The teacher proceeded to ask the four questions, discretely documenting their responses. The students also answered another question in their Google Classroom daily. The question was

“What are you grateful for today?” The answers were recorded, and tracked throughout the intervention. The teacher met with students daily, regardless of in person or remoted learning days. When there were remote days, there was not the ability to have one to one face time, so the conference took place via email. During the conference, if the student had late work, they would plan out what work would be done at home in order to return to the prescribed schedule. Student work was checked daily, and monitored two ways during the data collection period, daily as well as weekly. This was done in order to best track student data, and gave visual representation to emerging trends that needed to be addressed or adjusted by the teacher.

Students worked together in order to set up class brain breaks to increase productivity and movement options. During the daily morning meeting, students would vote on what movements they wanted to do (10 push-ups, 30 second wall sit, 5 burpees, etc.). This was then written on the whiteboard, and as students completed a work, they completed a brain break. This increased movement, and showcased the Montessori philosophy in a student-centered classroom.

### **Data Analysis**

Late work has been an increasing issue within the upper elementary (grades 4-6) classroom. This has been attributed to lack of normalcy in the classroom, along with the disconnect of intrinsic motivation, presumably from the effects of Covid-19 in education. The interventions set in place for students included finding gratitude in their lives, student led conferences daily, in order to see what impact, they have on late work with students.

Conferences with students covered: work completion, what the student will work on that day, along with what homework they will do, if they have late work to get caught up on. The students had two work plans to choose from. Students who had what was deemed to be a significant amount of late works (five or more), set up work to complete at home. This list was

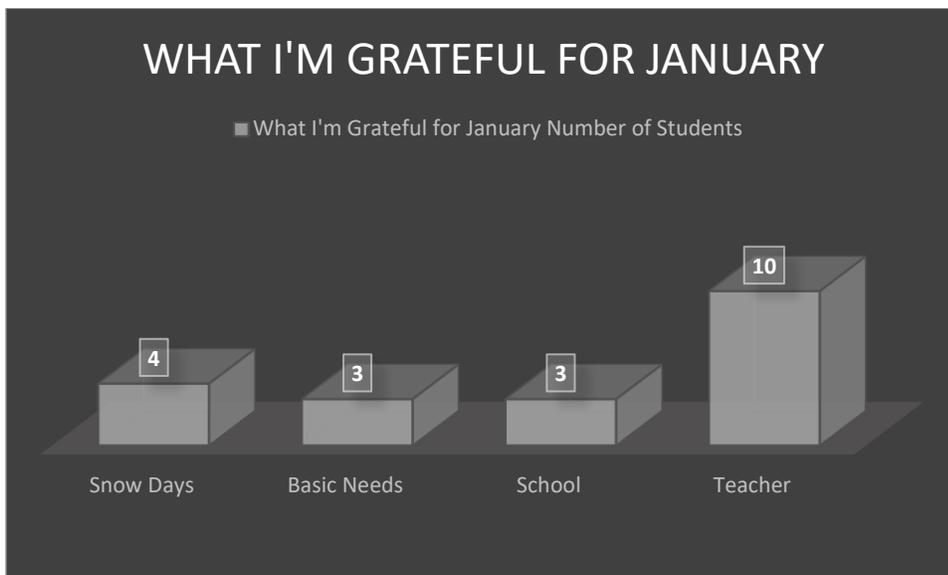
emailed to the parents, and the students. The students also had it written on their daily work plan, and wrote the work inside their planner.

The first part of the intervention was asking students daily what they were thankful for. When data collection started, 50% of the students stated they were thankful for their teacher, while only 15% of the students reported being thankful for basic needs (Figure 1). The difference between the graph at the beginning of the data collection, and the end of the data collection shows the students being more grateful for their basic needs.

It was shocking to see that 45% of the students listed their basic needs (food, shelter, clothing), (Figure 2).

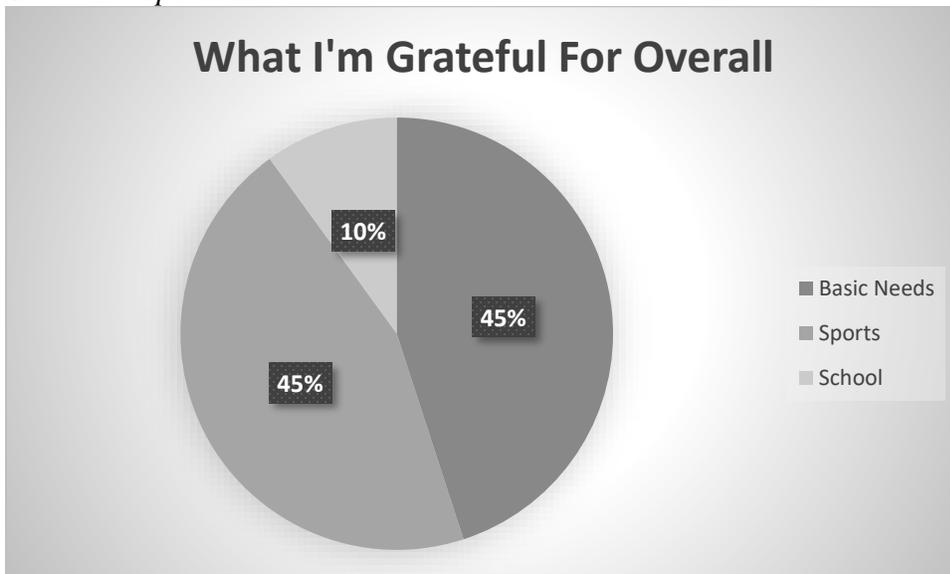
The work of filling out what students were grateful for, was assigned to students daily, and was not for the students to share with anyone other than the teacher, giving students freedom to be honest with themselves, and with the teacher.

**Figure 1**  
*Initial Responses*



*Note.* This figure indicates that basic needs were not as prevalent at the start of the semester.

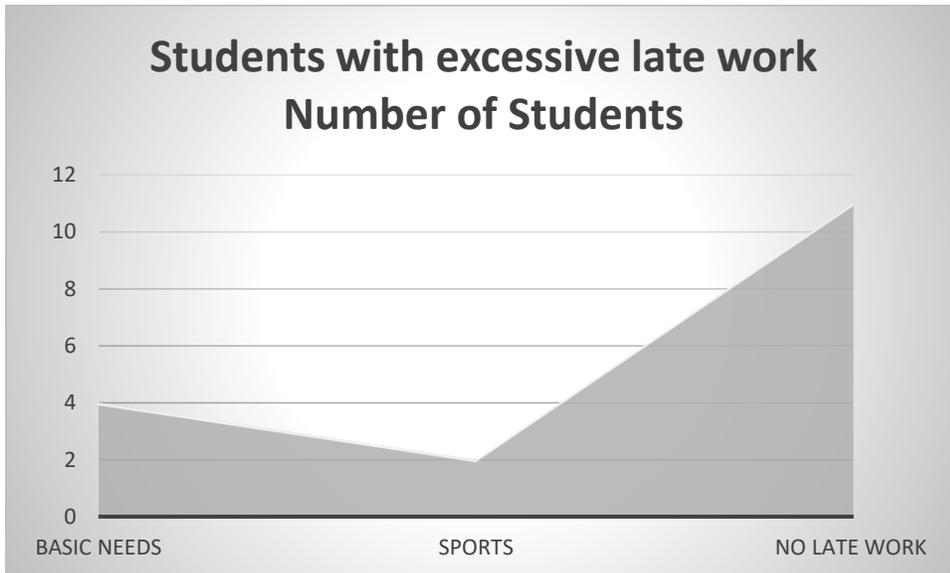
**Figure 2**  
*Overall Responses*



*Note:* This shows what students had the most gratitude for during the data collection time period overall. This shows that basic needs were equally as important to students as sports and extra-curricular activities.

Upon further analysis of the data, 23% of students who were initially grateful for basic needs had the highest percentage of late work, as shown in Figure 3. Data also noted that students with excessive late work did not have parents who responded to the daily communication about how to get the student caught up.

Surprising insight: students who were grateful for having basic needs met also had the highest percentage of late work (Figure 3). Additionally, these students were ones that did not have parents that regularly responded to daily communication, indicating a lack of academic support at home. While this was an unexpected finding, it is in line with various other research. The socioeconomic status of the classroom as a whole would not indicate that basic needs were a worry for the students. Having such a large percentage of students grateful for basic needs indicated that students have a deeper connection to the basics than initially believed.

**Figure 3***Excessive Late Work*

*Note:* This graph shows that students who were involved in extra-curricular activities, like sports, were less likely to have excessive amounts of late work.

The conferences tracked late work, which was averaged weekly (Figure 3). The students' late work was color-coded: yellow for 0 outstanding late works and red for excessive (five or more) outstanding late work. Work was graded nightly and talked about as a class during morning meetings. Students voted on several ways to keep motivated as a class, and voted on for every work they completed, they would do a brain break exercise (10 burpees, 30 second wall-sit, 25 crunches, etc.). Working as a class to create and implement the class goal, motivated students and created a more cohesive and team-oriented classroom. In the note's column of the late work tracker, any vital information, such as absences, was documented, and CQA was

used for a Covid Quarantine Absence. By the end of the data collection period, out of the 45% of students in the class who had excessive late work, 25% of them showed improvement and were able to go from five or more late works to not having excessive late work.

**Figure 4**

Late Work

Name	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Total	Daily Conference Y/N	Notes
1	17	15	14	12	11	13.8	Y	
2	19	16	5	5	3	9.6	Y	
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y	
4	7	6	5	5	3	5.2	Y	
5	18	17	21	19	19	18.8	Y	Absent 2.5 days
6	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y	
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y	
8	0	4	2	2	2	2	Y	
9	17	15	14	15	15	15.2	Y	
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y	
11	23	23	22	21	22	22.2	Y	CQA
12	0	2	5	4	1	2.4	Y	
13	35	38	38	39	39	37.8	Y	Changed seating
14	5	7	5	3	3	4.6	Y	
15	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y	
16	22	23	25	21	22	22.6	Y	Coming in early to work
17	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y	
18	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y	
19	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y	
20	0	0	1	0	0	0.2		
						7.72		

Another intervention that was put in place, was the type of work plan offered to students who had excessive late work. The difference between the two work plans lies not only the number of works planned for work time, but also, the homework to be completed is planned during conference times. The students who are on schedule, or had fewer than five (5) late works had access to any work plan they wanted to use. Most of the students who had zero late works, chose the daily work plan that planned out four (4) of their daily goals. Students without late work did not have to use a daily work plan, if they maintained zero late works for three consecutive weeks. Students with excessive late work, planned with the teacher, and planned out five (5) goals for the day. Students also planned out at least three (3) late works to take home as homework. Homework planned did not exceed forty (40) minutes per evening.

### **Action Plan**

The purpose of this research was to see the effects of not only students showing gratitude, but also what having conferences with students did to the late work that was plaguing the classroom. Throughout the process, student late work fluctuated more than anticipated given the strategies that were put into place. Throughout the research process, students were given three-hour work blocks, consistent with the Montessori model of teaching, and allow students to get through their false-fatigue.

The data initially showed that when students felt as though they had solid supports in place, they were more apt to continuously have little to no late work. This was consistent with the initial belief going into the research process.

This study also showed that students who struggled with late work would benefit from increased interactions with the teacher to help manage work load, and help organizational habits.

The over-arching question of the research was about adding gratitude into the classroom, and what impact it had on student success.

Analysis of the data shows some key findings: first, there is a direct correlation to parental involvement, and the amount of late work that students have. Students that had strong and active parental roles in their education, had the most significant decrease in late work. Students with little to no parental involvement, had the most drastic increase of late work. One of the most surprising findings from the data, indicated that basic needs were more of a concern in the classroom than previously thought. The data supported the belief that students exhibited disruptive behaviors in the classroom when they had consistently high amounts of late work.

Another key finding is that every student who consistently had less than five late works, was involved with both school activities and outside of school activities. Students being involved with activities indicates that they have better time management skills, and are more likely to be intrinsically motivated.

When analyzing data, it was clear the Montessori philosophy was strongly tied to the students, and their strong sense of community was prevalent in several areas in the classroom. Students established ways to hold one another accountable for their work getting submitted, and independently, set up brain-breaks for students who showed the need for them. The students also established a system to ask questions among peers, work in groups for work that was large and took additional time, and calming learning opportunities in the classroom.

The impacts of teaching from the analysis of data include establishing strong relationships with the students and the parents. One of the biggest areas of impact lies within setting up communication expectations early in the year, and reviewing them often to encourage

parental involvement. Setting up opportunities for parent involvement, establishes a dialogue, and allows for students to feel a cohesive relationship at both home and school. When students feel secure, they are more apt to perform to high standards. Communication also allows parents to feel a part of their child's education. When parents feel a connection, they

The Montessori philosophy relies heavily on creating a strong community, so the students feel comfortable, and want to perform well. In order to follow the Montessori philosophy with fidelity, students require the freedom to choose their work. This impacts the teaching, when students have excessive late work. Allowing students to develop intrinsic motivation, along with the feeling of success can be hindered when late work extends beyond five (5).

Students also need to be allowed time to reflect on the work they have submitted, and have opportunities for re-teaching. Re-teaching allows students private opportunities to reflect on the work, as well as ask questions on what can be impacting submitting work on time.

Research tends to lend itself to asking additional questions. This research was no different. Several questions arose while conducting this research. Some of the largest questions coming out of this research were, how Covid-19 lockdowns and remote learning impact students once returned to the classroom, and how to increase parent involvement, and its impact on student success.

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Appendix A

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Work 1:

Approx. time to complete:  
Actual time to complete:

Work 4:

Approx. time to complete:  
Actual time to complete:

Work 2:

Approx. time to complete:  
Actual time to complete:

Work 5:

Approx. time to complete:  
Actual time to complete:

Work 3:

Approx. time to complete:  
Actual time to complete:

Work I plan to work on tonight: (40 -50 minutes total)

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Approximate time \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Approximate time \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Approximate time \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Work 1:

Work 4:

Work 2:

Work I can bring home today:

Work 3: