

# Creating a Peaceful Community: School and Family Engagement at California Montessori Project

Teresa Lyday-Selby, M.Ed.





# **Abstract**

 School and family engagement is a process of schools developing relationships with families, seeking out and acting on families' input, and creating mutually respectful partnerships with families (Ferlazzo, 2011).

 School and family engagement is a responsibility shared by schools and families, spans children's lives from infancy to career, changes as children develop, and offers a view of children within all spheres of influence on them (Weiss & Lopez, 2009; Epstein, 1995a)

 School and family engagement must be a part of a district infrastructure that sets the standard for administrators to identify it as being of equal importance as student achievement (Westmoreland, et al. 2009).

 School and family engagement supports student achievement and empowers families with greater feelings of parental efficacy and confidence to become leaders within the school community (Cotton & Wikeland, 1989; Hoover-Dempsey, et al, 2005).

·When children develop within the supportive environment created by school and family engagement, see adults modeling peaceful and democratic behavioral choices, and have access to the rich knowledge base available through the community and the curriculum, it prepares them to become active participants in the global community (Barron, 2002; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Danesh, 2006; McFarland, 2006; Daniel, 2011).

 The purpose of this project was to develop a system that includes parent meetings, parent education workshops, and staff development that will help parents and educators at California Montessori Project (CMP) create stronger systems of school and family engagement, and act as a foundation and springboard for peace education.

 The researcher conducted qualitative research including a survey of educators at CMP, a review of literature, an analysis of archival documents, and action research as a participantobserver in order to create and implement a system of school and family engagement.



# Method

·A survey of educators was conducted which asked for opinions from certified and classified staff on implementing a school-wide model for parent participation and workshops on the subject of Montessori philosophy and peace education.

 Archival documents were reviewed including charter documents and memoranda of understanding, school accountability report cards, parent perception surveys, committee meeting records, and WASC accreditation action plan.

 Discussion was generated with colleagues and notes were kept on these discussions. An inspection of newsletters posted on the school's website was conducted.

The researcher kept a journal throughout the implementation of the project.

·Participants for the action research portion of this project were CMP families, and the teachers and support staff of CMP.

Limitations of project

- Changes in school leadership during the implementation of the project
- Perceptions of key players within the school and organization regarding the definition and necessity of school and family engagement
- The uniqueness of the school site may preclude direct transfer of methods and systems implemented.

# Site of Project

 California Montessori Project (CMP) is an independent public charter school that uses Montessori methodology and curriculum that is aligned to California State Standards.

•CMP has 6 campuses located in 4 school districts in the greater Sacramento area, 5 of

# Site for Project (cont'd)

Teachers at CMP must hold both a valid California Teaching Credential and Montessori

•CMP is committed to small total school populations, low student: teachers ratios, and a high degree of parent involvement.

# Review of Relevant Literature

### Research Question 1: What is the Montessori Method?

The history and methods of Montessori education were outlined in detail so that the readers. many of whom would not be familiar, would have a working knowledge of Montessori pedagogy as they considered school and family engagement within CMP.

### Research Question 2: What is a Charter School?

A review of charter school history and policy in California was included so that the readers would understand the site of the project.

### Research Question 3: What is School and Family Engagement?

. Involvement is schools indentifying projects and goals, and telling parents how and where they can help out. Engagement is schools developing relationships with families, listening and learning from their input, and forming partnerships with them (Ferlazzo, 2011). We want School and Family Engagement.

. School and Family Engagement: is a shared responsibility between schools, community agencies, and families; continues across the child's lifespan; and supports the child's education and development in all the spheres of learning in the child's life (Weiss &

•It is necessary to change the form and function of School and Family Engagement to match the child's changing developmental needs as they move from childhood to adolescence by modifying the following: parenting, home-school relationships, and responsibility for learning (Weiss, et al, 2006).

•School and Family Engagement is a reflection of how schools care for children and a way of looking at students as children, rather than just students (Epstein, 1995).

. School and Family Engagement is a key strategy for education reform through a district infrastructure which identifies School and Family Engagement as being of equal importance to student achievement (Westmoreland, et al, 2009).

 Epstein (1995) developed a framework to describe six different types of parental involvement (engagement) in schools and the implications of that involvement for students, parents, and teachers. The six types are as follows: parenting, communicating with school, volunteering at school, supporting learning at home, participating in school governance and academic decision making, collaborating with community.

Research Question 4: Why is School and Family Engagement

- It is identified among best practices (PTA, 2009).
- It promotes student achievement (Henderson, et al., 2004).
- It promotes parent empowerment (Hoover-Dempsey, et al, 2005; Daniel, 2011).

Because education is a social process.

- · School as social institution and primary instrument for social reform, provides a model of the community nurturing the child (Dewey, 1897).
- Makes "funds of knowledge" from community available to the child so they become successful members of community (Moll, et al. 1992, p. 2).
- The child is "the builder of humanity" and education is the mission to fundamentally change society leading to peace (Montessori, 2007, p.38).



# Review of Relevant Literature (cont'd)

•It provides a model of democratic values and prepares children to become members of the global community (Barron, 2002).

•It lays a foundation for education for peace (Danesh, 2006; Montessori, 2007).

# Research Question 5: How is School and Family Engagement

 Create systems to conduct school and family engagement (Epstein, 1995; Ferrara, 2009). ·Create systems to support school and family engagement.

- . Monthly parent meetings (Auerbach, 2009)
- Home visits, parents in the classroom, campus beautification, changing school culture (Rule and Kyle, 2009)
- Building a peaceful community, parent observations, peace lessons for parents (Drew, 1987)

 Conduct peace education and teach peacemaking skills (Drew, 1987; McFarland, 2004: Danesh. 2006)

. Prepare teachers to interact with families and sustain system of school and family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey, et al, 2002; Epstein, 2011).

# Research Question 6: What are the barriers to School and Family Engagement?

· Educators and administrators have a narrow view of the substance of school and family engagement (Ferrara, 2009)

•Families have a short sighted approach to school and family engagement (Ferlazzo,

•The attitudes of faculty and administrators of teacher preparation programs limit the implementation of curriculum to teach the skills of school and family engagement (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). This applied to in-service teacher educators as well (Ferrara, 2009).

 Parents feel they have no time to participate in their child's school, are not confident in their ability to participate, do not see participation as important, or are not familiar with the dominant language and culture of the school. (Wherry, 2009).

 Schools do not welcome parents or communicate effectively, respectfully or reciprocally with parents (Wherry, 2009).

. Counter barriers by knowing parent perceptions and providing accurate view of school, parent must be present and proactive at school (Ferrara, 2009)



# **Findings**

•CMP is providing traditional ways in which families can be involved in the school and is informing families of these opportunities in several traditional ways

. They have identified a need to develop ways in which to engage families in true partnerships on a classroom, school, and district-wide basis.

•The teachers use peace education in the classrooms, but are not passing these lessons on

. There is a difference on many levels in the perception of what constitutes school and family

"Constructive education for peace must not be limited to teaching in schools. It is the task that calls for the efforts of all mankind."

Dr. María Montessori (2007, p. 24)

# Implications for Practice

### A Model for School and Family Engagement

- I. Family Participation and Engagement
- Forty hours per year of participation (70 hrs. for 2 or more children attending school).
- Tours for prospective families (before submitting application for the lottery) which include information about the history of CMP, an overview of Montessori philosophy, and an overview of the Montessori classroom.
- Family Orientation to grade-level and classroom within the first 2 weeks of every school
- Family Education
  - Montessori 101
  - Integrating Montessori Principles into Your Home
  - Integrating Montessori Principles into Your Home (workshop)

  - . Family Nights (Harvest Festival, Art Walk, Continent Party, themed)

#### II. Parent Meetings

- Held monthly in the classroom
  - · Montessori lesson presentations and peace education
  - Curriculum overview
  - Plan classroom events and fieldtrips
  - · Parent networking and building parent-teacher relationships
- · Parent coordinators for classroom activities and needs
- Parents as educators

### III. Professional Development for Educators

- School and Family Engagement at CMP
- How to Conduct a Parent Meeting
- How to Use Your Newsletter for Telling Families About Montessori Education
- · Ongoing mentoring for new and veteran educators

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# **Contact Information**

# Teresa Lyday-Selby, M.Ed.

California Montessori Project American River: Fair Oaks California

tselbv@cacmp.org or tcselbv@hotmail.com