

A Preliminary Survey of Parent Education Practices in Montessori Schools

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Abstract

A pilot online survey on parent education in Montessori schools was completed by a convenience and snowball sample of fourteen schools. Schools appeared to vary in how parent education was delivered, while there was some similarity in content areas chosen. Ideas for an improved study are presented.

Introduction

In my consulting and teacher education roles, I have seen a tremendous variation in parent education program at Montessori schools, even at large and well run schools. I have also seen issues like high losses of families during the transition from early childhood to elementary programs, and parent demands for non-Montessori curriculum to be added. This indicates that parent education may be not getting the attention and resources that it should. This was confirmed by last school year's experience, in which I was a consultant for a local public Montessori school. There were clearly needs for parent education, but it was not an issue that ever got address—just too many other things had to be addressed right away. Ralph Lau's article in the Spring edition of *Montessori Life* emphasized how important this area is for his school in Hong Kong and beyond (Lau, D, and Yau, R., 2015)

My goal is to find out more about what Montessori schools are doing about parent education. This first study is a pilot study to find out how much schools are doing in this area, and some additional basic facts. I hope to follow with a more systematic and detailed study based on this pilot.

Review of Literature

Galindo and Sheldon's 2012 study examines the mediating role of family involvement with a large sample of kindergarten classes and a well designed study. Their theoretical orientation owes a lot to Epstein's 2001 book on school and family partnerships. They found strong support for their first hypothesis, that school efforts to increase parent involvement did in fact increase it. Other variables, such as socioeconomic status also had an effect. Their second hypothesis was that there would be an association between family involvement and gains in math and reading. Their findings were that "Regardless of their starting skills in the fall, students had greater gains in math and reading, on average, if they attended schools that provided more opportunities for family and school communications and interactions."

Even in this study, however, there were limitations:

The measure of school outreach in this dataset largely included activities that aimed to increase parents' participation at meetings and events at school. It is not surprising, therefore, that no significant association was found between school outreach and parental involvement at home or parents' educational expectations. (Galindo and Sheldon, 2012)

Since the importance of parent education is relatively well supported, I think it is time to examine what Montessori schools are doing.

Limiting the search to parent education specifically in Montessori schools produced two interesting action research studies, both recent. Harrison (2014) studied the effects of a parent book club on one particular Montessori school. There was a good variety of triangulation, with a variety of data gathered. But the primary conclusion was that "parent education was beneficial regarding parents (sic) education of the Montessori Method." Bisceglia (2014) studied six families in a Montessori infant-toddler environment. This was an ambitious study, with home visits, take home "workbags", and good triangulation with multiple data sources. She reports that the "parents actively engaged with their child's educational journey will help their child in more meaningful ways in the home environment.

Methods

I used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. I asked school administrators and teachers that I knew to complete the survey. One person offered to forward the survey to other members of her state Montessori association. Fourteen schools completed the survey. It's important to realize that this sampling method gives a quick look and what some schools are doing, but it cannot be seen as representative of AMS schools in the US.

This was a descriptive study, what is sometimes called informally a "snapshot" study. My goal was to test the instrument and see what this small sample of schools had to say about their parent education programs. The instrument was designed by the researcher. Since space is limited in this short format write-up, the questions will be shown with the data.

Results

The first question asked who was completing the report; 62% were school heads, with the rest other administrators or others. The first interesting finding was that 17% of those answering reported that they did not have a parent education program.

A number of respondents chose not to answer question three, which asked whether their school offered parents printed or video materials to use at home. Seven of the eight respondents reported that they did.

Question four shows some more details about the frequency of parent education offerings. Again, this question had some respondents choosing not to answer—total responses, shown by question in Table 1 below ranged from seven to nine.

Table 1 Frequency Counts for Parent Education Activities by How Frequently Schools Offer Them

#	Question	Never	Once per year	Two to three times per year	Monthly	More than once per month	Total Responses
1	Parent education nights	0	0	5	3	1	9
2	Required Observation	7	0	1	0	0	8
3	Optional observations	0	1	4	0	2	7
4	Day long or half-day events for parent education	5	4	0	0	0	9
5	Newsletters from classrooms	0	0	0	5	4	9
6	Newsletters from school	0	0	0	4	5	9
7	Emails	1	0	0	0	8	9
8	Web based parent education content	4	1	0	3	1	9

What patterns can we see in this small sample? The parent education night seems to be offered two to three times a year, with only one school offering this monthly. Required observations are very rare, with only one school using this. Optional observations are most often used two to three times per year. Half-day or day long events were infrequent: five schools reported Never, and four reported once a year. Newsletters appeared to be one of the most common and frequent parent education tool, and were offered either monthly or more than once

a month, with only small difference between school wide and classroom newsletters. Eight of nine schools sent emails more than once a month. In future version of this study, I would like to find out more about the content in these emails. I wonder if these are more about upcoming events and permission slips, rather than providing more information about what Montessori schools are doing. Finally, web based programs were used by four out of five schools. In the future, I would like to have an open-ended question here as a follow-up, to see what they were using, i.e. are these constructed by the school or are they making using of existing online content, and if so, what?

Question five was also a matrix-type question, asking about specific possible content areas in Montessori and age ranges of children served. The results are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2
Frequency Counts of Age Ranges Served by Common Topics for Montessori Parent Education

#	Question	Infant and Toddler	Early Childhood (3-6)	Elementary (6-12)	Middle school (12-15)	Total Responses
1	Basic Montessori terms and concepts.	1	7	1	0	9
2	Montessori curriculum areas	0	2	7	0	9
3	Presentations and work cycle	0	5	4	0	9
4	Montessori Q & A	1	3	4	0	8
5	Child development ideas	1	6	2	0	9
6	Transitions to next level and schools after Montessori	0	1	6	2	9
7	Other	0	2	0	1	3
8	Other	0	1	1	0	2

These data are marred by a survey problem, which was that multiple choices were not possible for each age range, thus respondents could only choose one topic per age range. In the comments, it was made clear that many of these topics are offered across the age ranges. Also, of course, there were many more schools with 3-6 programs than middle school or infant and toddler classes. This data therefore, does not present a clear picture of content areas by age range served. In the next version, I will ask the content areas (expanded by what some respondents wrote in the Other choices, and not try to have these arranged by age ranges at the same time.

Other ideas for the next version include a question on the size of the school, and who is in charge of parent education.

While the small and convenient sample makes this results not very generalizable at all, I feel the next round will have an improved instrument and I will work to get a bigger sample as well. Despite these limitations, I feel this data does point to a need for more support for high quality parent education as a need for schools.

References

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