

Homework and Montessori

By Christine Emeran, PhD

For Montessori Elementary programs, deciding how to handle homework can be difficult: Should homework be assigned? If so, what kind of work is appropriate, and how much? Should students be involved in choosing their homework? In general, Montessori organizations do not issue official Montessori homework policies,* which can further complicate this issue.

Montessori's theories on following the child seem to suggest a child-centered approach to homework. Student choice is a characteristic of the Montessori pedagogy: Children should have the freedom to choose experiences that capture their attention, which contributes to knowledge development (Montessori, 1948, cited by Sullivan, 2007, p. 10). Allowing students to choose their homework may also affect their motivation; Cordova and Lepper (1996) observed 72 fourth- and fifth-grade students from two private schools and found that choices in learning contexts resulted in an increase in intrinsic motivation and engagement.

Bagby and Sulak (2017) compared Montessori schools (N=172) with and without a homework policy. They found that both types of schools assigned more days of homework to Lower Elementary students than Upper Elementary students, but the Lower Elementary work was less difficult and took less time to complete. While the Upper Elementary students were assigned fewer days of homework, it was more challenging and took longer to complete. In total, Upper Elementary students spent more time doing homework. This result built upon an earlier study by Sulak and Bagby (2015) of Montessori classroom teachers (N=100, some with informal school-wide homework policies and informal classroom homework policies) that found a student's time spent on homework varied by grade level, with the oldest students spending the most time on homework assignments. Lastly, an unpublished master's thesis by Noreen Sullivan (2007) surveyed parents of children (N=424) from two Montessori and two non-Montessori Catholic schools on characteristics of homework, such as time spent and choice of content. Sullivan found that the Montessori students were twice as likely to have choice in

selecting homework topics than non-Montessori students (pp. 21–22).

Catherine M. Scott and Nelda Glaze, from Coastal Carolina University (2017), assessed the effects of student choice in a new homework policy at Ocean Montessori School (a pseudonym), a public Montessori charter school in the southeastern United States. Elementary students could determine their own homework, based on loose guidelines: Homework could include “community service, reading, [and] household responsibilities” (pp. 4–5). Half the students reported their homework included chores and extracurricular activities, while five of eight students stated they had done at least one new activity for homework (p. 9). Teacher response was mixed. Mid-semester, half the teachers in the study abandoned the new policy and reverted back to traditional homework, citing dissatisfaction with students' choices of activity and an overall decline in quality of work (pp. 5–7).

These studies have limits of representation, and caution should be exercised to avoid generalizing claims beyond the sample. The results may suggest that extending student choice—a hallmark of Montessori classrooms—to homework is more nuanced than initially expected and requires further research.

References

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- Sullivan, N. (2007). *Characteristics of early Elementary homework: Montessori and traditional* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from www.amshq.org/Research/Research-Library.

Suggested Reading

- Bagby, J., & Sulak, T. N. (2014). Connecting homework effectiveness with Montessori practice. *Montessori Life, 26*(4), 44–46.

*The American Montessori Society, the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education, Montessori Educational Programs International, and the Association Montessori International/USA have no official policy on homework. For general guidelines, see: montessori.org/frequently-asked-questions.



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