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Instilling Reverence for Montessori Materials Through Rituals of Grace and Courtesy

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Instilling Reverence for Montessori Materials
Through Rituals of Grace and Courtesy

Action Research Project
By Stephanie Van Fleet

Instilling Reverence for Montessori Materials

Through Rituals of Grace and Courtesy

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Advisor _____

Date _____

Abstract

This action research studied the impact of grace and courtesy lessons on the classroom environment. The study occurred in a private Montessori elementary (6-9 year old) classroom. Eighteen students received daily presentations of grace and courtesy lessons over a four-week period for a total of 20 lessons. Sources of data included photographs, environmental assessments, observations and student evaluations. The presenting of grace and courtesy lessons resulted in improved assessments of the classroom environment, decreased teacher intervention when material misuse was observed and an increase of positive teacher interaction. Students began to complete the entire process or ritual of a work in a Montessori classroom, from the preparation of the workspace to returning the material to its original place on the shelf. Grace and courtesy lessons have positively impacted the classroom environment and will continue to be presented often.

Children in a Montessori classroom walk with confidence around an environment that is child-led, rather than adult-led. Montessori students often are observed performing one of the many typical Montessori student rituals. A ritual of unrolling a mat, or the intricate choreography of hand washing have been described as “ritualized activity” and “the most distinctive feature of Montessori education (Cossentino, 2005, p.3). Other common rituals observed are children choosing work. Children choose from didactic materials, prepare a workspace of either a floor rug or a small table, execute the work, put the work away, and clean up the work area. Seldom is the entire class of students doing the same thing, and with that comes a need for order, organization and an awareness of their surroundings. The Montessori classroom is free from desks, and children instead move about the classroom freely, choosing where and how to work.

More importantly, the students learn with hands on manipulatives that are referred to as the Montessori materials. These materials consist of intricate, beautiful, precise, and manipulative materials that aid both the student in learning concepts, and the teacher in the presentation and assessment of the concept. These materials are very costly, and some take much time to create; they also often have many pieces and if something is lost or broken, the lesson is incomplete. This disrupts the scope and sequence of the curriculum, as well as the child’s exercise in concentration. For example, consider a child who may choose to work with the long blue chain, which consists of 25 light blue colored bead bars (5 beads per bar). This chain aids children counting from one to 125, which also is the cube of five, or five to the third power. Corresponding with the chain are numbered

arrows that are placed along the fifth bead of the bar (i.e. 5, 10, 15, etc.). If arrows are lost, the child is unable to complete the work as desired. This not only disrupts the child's concentration, but could also cause the child to fail to gain the complete concept of the material through its proper and complete use, which could cause the child to avoid the material.

Lost and broken materials not only contribute to a missed sense of order and reverence for the Montessori environment, but they can also instigate the disorder. Like a vicious cycle, children's sense of order is disrupted by the lack of a prepared environment but also when other children observe the improper use of the classroom tools, it reinforces this lack of regard. When Primary Montessori guides (teachers who teach ages 3-6) observed the elementary environment that is the subject of this action research, many were shocked to see this behavior in comparison to the way primary children handled the materials. The group of students in this study had an average of three years Montessori classroom experience, including two children with zero experience in a Montessori environment.

The interventions performed in the elementary environment before this action research project included verbal reminding and the loss of privilege for using a particular material; however these interventions had proven ineffective in solving the problem. If a child misused a material, they were instructed to return the work to the shelf. Sometimes a child would not be allowed to use the material again until the student received another lesson on how to use it properly. On some occasions of misuse materials would break, and children would be required to

attempt to repair them. The same students who had shown themselves to be quite capable of caring for materials at a younger age now needed redirection and reprogramming of the manner of which Montessori classroom materials are to be revered. These were the children that would, at the age of three or four, carefully carry 10 wooden rods of varying lengths to a prepared work rug, set up a maze, and practice walking around a maze of red rods ever so carefully so as not to step on the rods as well as return the material neatly to its original place on the shelf. Why were these same children, with their Montessori experience not revering the classroom materials with the same level of respect as they once had? How could they be taught to observe respect and reverence towards the materials of their education?

Montessori's theory of child development is called the Four Planes of Development. The elementary child falls into the second plane from age six to twelve years old. Child development in the second plane vastly differs from the development in the first plane. These differences are physical, social/emotional, cognitive, and psychological. For example, the child in the second plane begins to lose baby fat and teeth, while also beginning to begin want to work more with peers rather than independently. Montessori also believed that the second plane is when the imagination becomes a creative force in the child. The child is also developing a sense of morality, which can be observed in the child's development of a need for role models and a growing sense of justice. Dr. Montessori also developed the theory of sensitive periods. She believed that every child went through periods where particular information or stimuli were especially easy for a

child to obtain. Sensitive periods include areas of language, math, or even order. This research project is intended to see if the characteristics of the first plane of development, where most children experience the sensitive period for order, can be revisited, retaught, and hopefully instilled.

One of the most critical aspects of the Montessori Children's House (also known as Primary, which serves ages two and a half to age six) is lessons in Grace and Courtesy. Grace and Courtesy can be divided further into areas of concentration such as Practical Life, self-care, care of the environment and social/emotional communication. Lessons such as how to scrub a table fall under care of the environment and lessons on how to wash hands and leave the sink ready for the next person fall under care of self. Lessons of practical life would include spooning an object from one container to another, and an example of social/emotional communication would be teaching how to be happy for the success for others. The curriculum consists of lessons in life skills such as "How to introduce oneself," or "How to scrub a table." These lessons aid in the children's coordination, concentration, independence and order. This in turn prepares the children to care for themselves and fulfill an inner need to do purposeful work. The study will examine the effect of consistently implementing the Montessori Grace and Courtesy and practical life curricula to find if this improves the children's regard and care for the Montessori materials in a multi-grade six to nine year old Montessori elementary classroom

Review of Literature

The literature addresses the intentions of the Montessori environment and how it serves the needs of the child, particularly in the area of (1) teacher modeling; (2) order and organization; and (3) character development within the Montessori Curriculum.

Teacher Modeling

Cossentino (2003, 2005) explains how the rituals and work environment in a Montessori classroom vastly differ from the rituals and work environment in a traditional classroom. Cossentino (2005) describes how the Montessori rituals possess intricate choreography and are first performed by the teacher and impressed upon the children. Her writings describe the work rug or mat as a “symbol of precision” and the ritual associated with it as an “exact why” of things done in a Montessori classroom (Cossentino, 2005, p.229). Cossentino (2005) details her observation of a teacher giving a lesson and the manner in which the teacher uses the mat, observes silence, and uses little if any language. The observation continues to describe the lesson itself as performed in a formal, pattern action, often with emphasis on precision of how things are done. This act includes the handling of the materials, the mat, the placement of the materials on the shelf, and the care of the child’s workspace. Cossentino (2005) explains how one cannot perform the Montessori method without knowing how to “give a lesson” and otherwise interact with students and the environment (materials). This method of teaching is done very differently in comparison to traditional schools and is practiced similarly to ritual or ceremonial acts. Even the idea of presenting or giving a lesson is similar to that of giving a gift. Lillard (2008)

highly regards the role of the teacher when it comes to the presentation of materials. She states the materials should be presented as “something magical”. (Lillard, 2008, p. 22)

Lillard (2008) shares the developmental history of the Montessori materials, their purpose and how the children handle and treat them with great care. She explains how the adult (teacher) is to intervene when children handle the materials roughly. Lillard (2008) also touches upon a key component to the process of instilling deep regard for the materials. After the work is completed, the student pauses to admire and then carefully disassembles and returns the material to its original location.

Order and Organization

Montessori guides are trained to hold high standards for classroom organization. The ideal Montessori classroom is neat and organized with materials ready for use. For example, all pencils are sharpened, objects are aligned straight on the shelves, and mats are rolled up tight. Huxel (2013) describes an unruly, undisciplined Montessori environment where children are not respectful of others, or the materials they use. Huxel (2013) holds the teacher responsible for this behavior and declares that the spiritual preparation of the teacher is necessary. Huxel (1966) quotes Montessori stating the teacher must “prepare himself interiorly by systematically studying himself so that he can tear out his most rooted defects, those in fact which impede on his relations with children” (p. 149). Huxel touches on how teachers should move slowly and purposefully

around the classroom. Huxel concludes that it is the teacher who is the crucial piece to providing the foundations of other Montessori elements.

Order and organization of shelves and materials in the Montessori classroom model beauty, and similarities to crafted art are observable in the prepared environment. Haskins (2012) describes the classroom as a laboratory for the study of life. She explains how the organized environment serves as a guide, which enables the children to navigate the exercises and experiences successfully. Another benefit to the organized environment is stability and consistency. Haskins describes how the tools of floor tables and rugs set boundaries for workspaces, which allows for increased concentration. Haskins (2012) supports that order and organization in the prepared environment are directly related to the respect and the care of the environment.

Character Development within the Montessori Curriculum

Lloyd (2008) conducted a study to determine if normalization, one of the goals of Montessori education, could be taught. She describes normalization as a process of healthy development where children regularly and freely choose constructive activities based on their interests. The independent choice of the work by the child leads to the development of concentration, which is what Montessori called, “the true nature of the child” (Lloyd, 1989, p. 87).

Normalization can be described as the emergence of positive characteristics and elimination of negative behaviors. Lloyd (1989) observed that outcomes of normalization were concentration, love of work, self-discipline, and a refined

sense of sociability. Lloyd further explains that normalization is an integration of personality and a transformation of the child.

Cossentino (2005) describes one distinct ritual when the child places his or her hand on the teacher's shoulder and waits for teacher's attention in an effort to avoid interrupting the teacher. She affirms that this type of ritual practice confirms the virtues of concentration, order, independence and respect.

Cossentino believes these spiritual exercises not only aid the child in caring for him or herself and others but also the environment. Her detailed observation of the ritual use of the mat supports the idea that this ritual aids in the reverence of the work in the classroom. She implies that these rituals call upon the children's morality and point the moral compass to goodness. "The 'goods' or virtues of Montessori culture are defined in Maria Montessori's voluminous writings, which elaborate a holistic or 'cosmological' worldview centered on concentration, coordination, order, independence and respect (Cossentino, 2005, p.212). Vardin (2003) suggests that character, morality and a healthy psyche have the utmost importance in education, and claims that Montessori would agree.

Vardin (2003) discloses Montessori's belief that character education was of equal if not greater importance than academics. Montessori defined character education as "The deliberate effort to cultivate virtue—that is, objectively good human qualities that are good for the individual person and good for the whole society," (Vardin, 2003). Montessori also believed that these origins of character were formed in the first six years of life. Vardin (2003) summarized Montessori's identified virtues and described how they are cultivated in a Montessori

classroom. These virtues include concentration, perseverance, empathy or helpfulness, responsibility, obedience, and self-discipline.

Through the supportive research in teacher modeling, order and organization of the environment and character development within the Montessori curricula, this study asks whether children will develop reverence for Montessori materials in a Montessori elementary environment through an emphasis on lesson presentations in the Montessori grace and courtesy and practical life curricula.

Description of Research Process

Data was collected using the following methods: (1) observation forms for identifying which materials are being used, as well as how they are being used, (2) environmental assessment, (3) weekly student evaluation, and (4) photographic evidence of materials used within the classroom. Each day I presented a lesson in grace and courtesy and afterwards I conducted the morning observation, assessed the environment, and occasionally took photographs.

A list of presented lessons (See appendix A) was presented each day in the morning work cycle to the entire class. Consideration was given through reflective practice from the prior day's observation. If observed that classroom environment needed some attention, then a lesson impacting the environment would be presented, such as how to roll silverware. If I observed that there were several social /emotional conflicts in the prior day, then a lesson around character building, such as how to be happy for the success of others would be presented.

The four data collection tools were used to assess the children's care and regard for the classroom environment and its materials. Examples are the

observation of children preparing a work space prior to their selection of work, the work being carried to the workspace with care, the work being used as it was intended, the children returning materials to their original location on the shelf and the children cleaning up their workspace.

Observations were done once a day, at a random time in the morning three-hour work cycle (8:30-11:30 a.m.). This work cycle is sacred to the Montessori classroom as it consists of a three hour work-period where children are uninterrupted with transitions, special subjects such as art or music, or other instances in which children are not free to choose how they spend the work time. Observations would vary in the time they took. Some days the children were independent and the observations would last for 10-15 minutes. Other times, a child needed assistance and they would be accommodated in 3-4 minutes, or as long as it took to record a few brief observations. Materials that were in use were listed as well as if they were used on a rug or a table. If the materials that had been removed from the shelves had a child or children physically manipulating them with their hands, the materials were considered in use. An asterisk was recorded next to the material being used if the child completed the entire ritual of preparing the workspace through the cleaning up process. Observation forms (see appendix B) were collected after four weeks to determine which materials were being used and if there was a correlation of the care of materials.

The environmental assessment was done randomly once during the morning work cycle as a quick overview of the classroom state of orderliness. The environmental assessment was comprised of a Likert scale of one to five with

one being the least desired result and five being the most desired result. A total of six questions were rated on this scale 1) Complete disrespect, 2) Intervention needed, 3) Needs improvement, 4) Acceptable and 5) Desired. Frequency graphs were created to show how often the desired results were observed in relation to the respect for the classroom materials. See Appendix C for list of questions.

A weekly student evaluation had been consistently used in the elementary classroom. At the end of each week I met individually with each student and we reviewed a record of works completed that week. On the backside of the workplan is the student evaluation. The students completed a self-evaluation of five questions. The fourth question was added to this process for this study. This question asked the child if he or she handled the materials with care and respect. At the beginning of this study, the added question was introduced to the students.

Photographic evidence was used to provide examples of both care and disregard for the classroom materials. Images were taken of materials in and out of use.

Data Analysis

The data collected consisted of environmental assessments and photographic evidence in two parts. One part of the data collection was done prior to the implementation of planned grace and courtesy lessons. This data consisted of nine days of environmental assessments and capturing images of proper and improper use of materials within the classroom. The second part of the data collection took part over 20 days in which a grace and courtesy lesson was presented in the classroom each day.

Photographic Evidence

On occasion photographs were taken when a classroom material was observed being used either correctly or incorrectly. This was done to show a comparison of a desired use of a work rug and materials as well as evidence of misuse of materials in the classroom. In a Montessori classroom, children are shown how use a work rug which aids in defining a child's work space. Figure 1 shows a grammar material which consists of a wooden farm, realistic animals, a felt landscape, and correlating colored coded labels that teach the function of words. Examples would include black-bordered label that reads, "cow" for a noun or a red-bordered label that reads "drinks" for a verb. Figure 1 shows the inappropriate material use with the labels, and animals scattered both on and off the work rug. A clear box with compartments can be seen in Figure 1, this is where the labels are to be stored according to the border color of label. This photo shows the child's misuse of the material.



Figure 1. Misuse of material



Figure 2: Respectful use of material

Figure 2 shows a child using the multiplication checkerboard. The child has laid out a rug and placed both parts of the material on the rug, along with his notebook. The child has neatly organized this work.

Environmental Assessment

The environmental assessment was done a total of 29 times over the course of twenty school days during the morning work time of 8:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Each data table was duplicated to show what was assessed prior to the presentation of grace and courtesy lessons. A rating to assess the classroom environment was determined using a Likert scale of 1-5, 1 being the least desired observation, 5 being the most desired observation. The frequency shows the occurrence of each rating during the observations. The percentage is the ratio of frequency to number of observations. 9 observations were made prior to the study, and twenty were done during the presentations of grace and courtesy lessons.

Tables A show the data results prior to the grace and courtesy lessons and Tables B reflect what was assessed during the implementation of the study.

Table 1a.

Are children using the material for their intended purpose?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
5	8	40%
4	12	60%

Table 1b.

Are children using the material for their intended purpose?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	7	78%
3	2	22%

Table 2a.

Are children preparing a workspace before preparing materials?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	4	33%
3	5	56%
2	1	11%

Table 2b.

Are children preparing a workspace before preparing materials?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	13	65%
3	5	25%

2	2	10%
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Table 3a.

Are children carrying the materials appropriately?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	2	22%
3	5	56%
2	2	22%

Table 3b.

Are children carrying the materials appropriately?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	13	65%
3	7	35%

Table 4a.

Are children using a work rug?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	1	11%
3	4	44%
2	4	44%

Table 4b.

Are children using a work rug?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	13	65%
3	7	35%

Table 5a.

Are there materials not in use and not properly saved?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	7	35%
3	11	55%
2	2	11%

Table 5b.

Are there materials not in use and not properly saved?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
4	3	33%
3	5	56%
2	1	11%

Table 6a.

Are the materials returned to their original place on the shelf?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
3	6	67%
2	3	33%

Table 6b.

Are the materials returned to their original place on the shelf?

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
3	16	80%
2	4	20%

To determine if the presented grace and courtesy lesson had any influence on the student's care of the environment the frequency charts were combined to form a bar graph. Overall there was consistent improvement to the care and

regard to the use of materials through the presentation of grace and courtesy lessons, however only a minor improvement with respect to the children returning their work to the original place on the shelf. It is my belief that the reason students did not improve in this area is that there were fewer teacher interventions when materials were put in the wrong place because it often was not discovered until the children were out of the classroom.

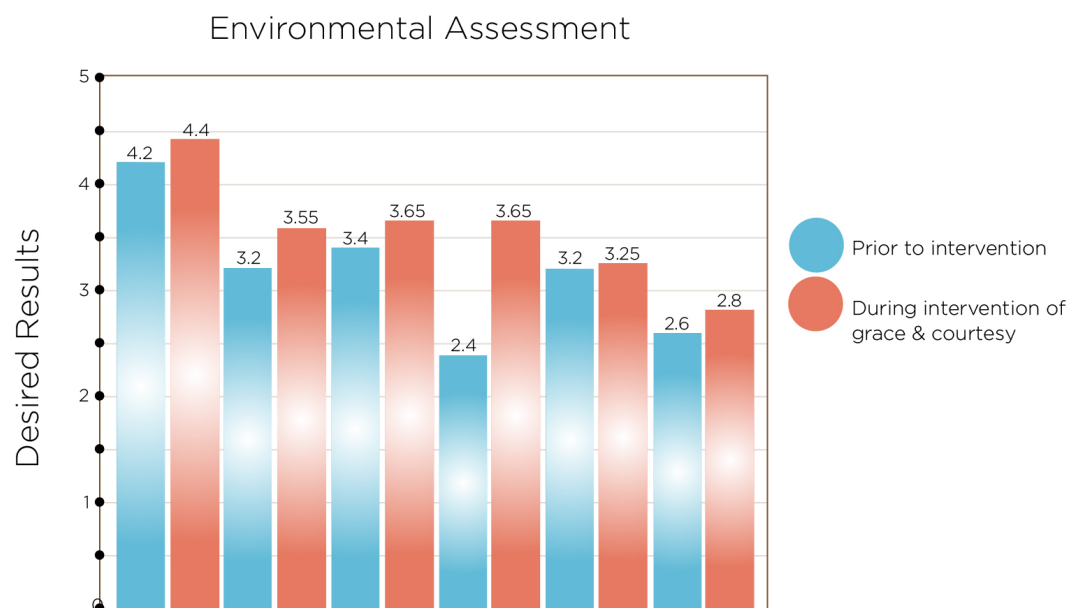


Figure 3. Each bar represents one of six environmental assessment questions

Observation Record

The daily observation record was used during the study to document which materials were off the shelf, either in use or having been left out. It was also used to document undesired use and disregard for classroom materials. In the classroom each child uses a clipboard to hold his or her weekly work record and other papers relating to work. The observer noted numerous times that the

children left these clipboards out on the floor or on tables rather than with the child or in the designated clipboard bin. The observer also noted that there were times when children used work on the floor rather than with the desired use of a work rug. The most common misuse for the classroom materials was the failure to return the material back to the shelf. Children also frequently left out materials on tables or rugs after being used. Analysis of the observation records were done in two parts; observations made in the first two weeks (10 days) and the last two weeks (10 days) of the study. Figures 4-7 show what environmental infractions were observed during the study. Figure 4 shows the percentage of infractions and Figure 5 shows the number of observed infractions during the first half of the study. Figure 6 and 7 show the percentage and actual infractions observed in the second half of the study.

Observed Environmental Infractions: Part 1 of Study

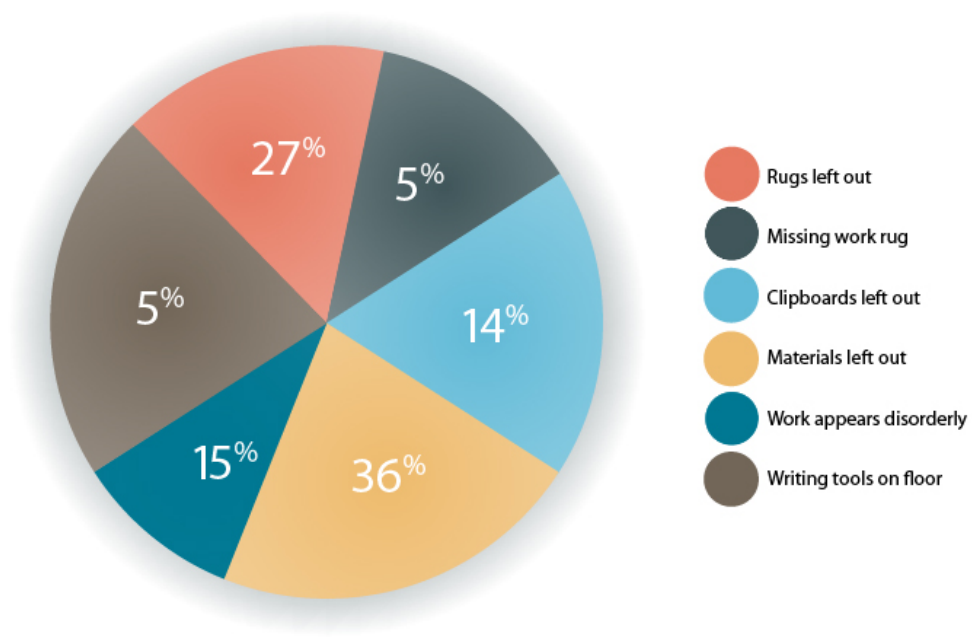


Figure 4.

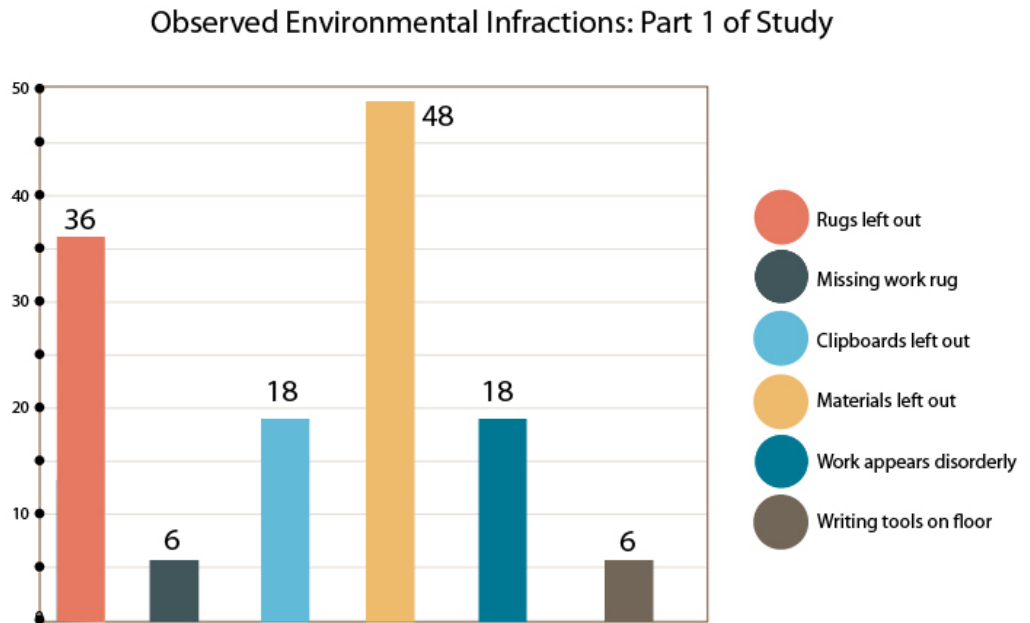


Figure 5.

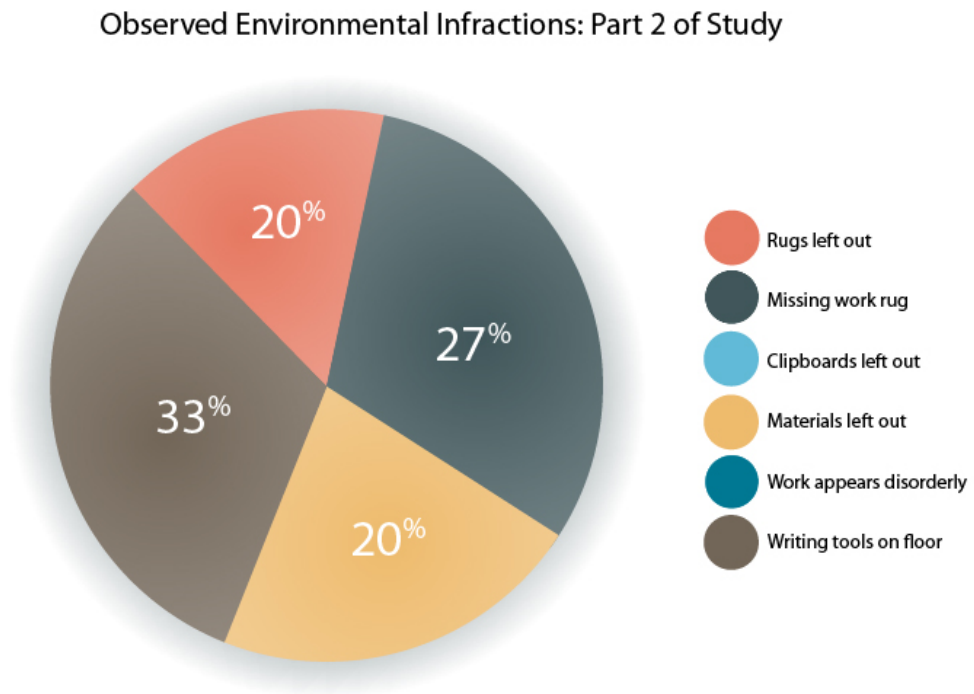


Figure 6.

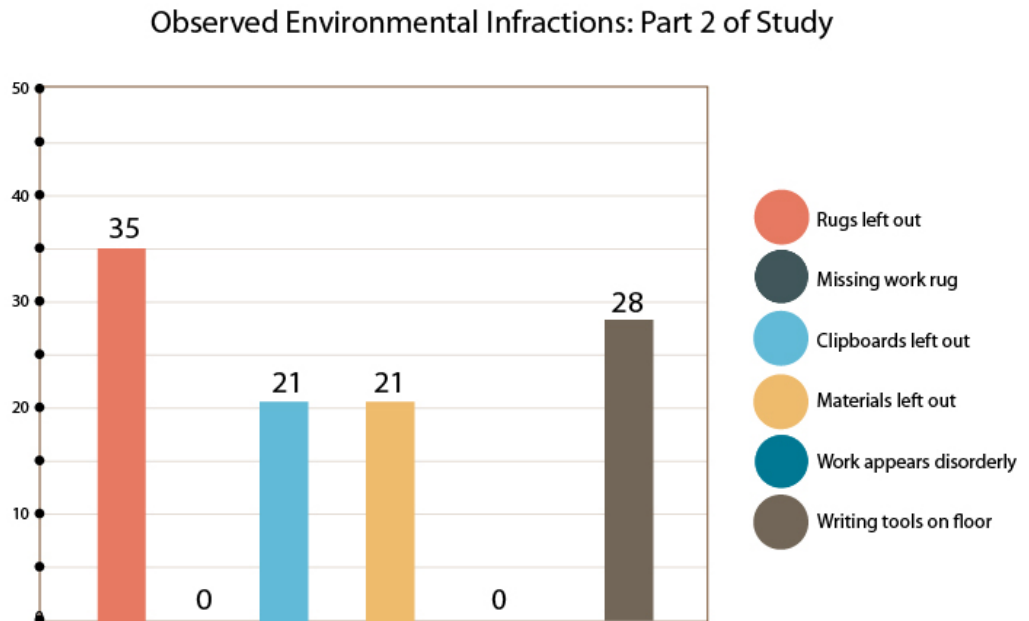


Figure 7.

These figures make it evident that through the presentation of grace and courtesy students improved on using work rugs with their materials as well as keeping their work neat and orderly. Although there was improvement in the care of the Montessori materials, a decrease in the lack of regard for writing utensils and clipboards left around the classroom was observed.

Student Evaluation

At the end of each week for four consecutive weeks, students completed a self-evaluation inquiring if they believed that the classroom materials were handled with care. For four consecutive Fridays, every student's response was affirmative that they thought they handled the classroom with respect and care.

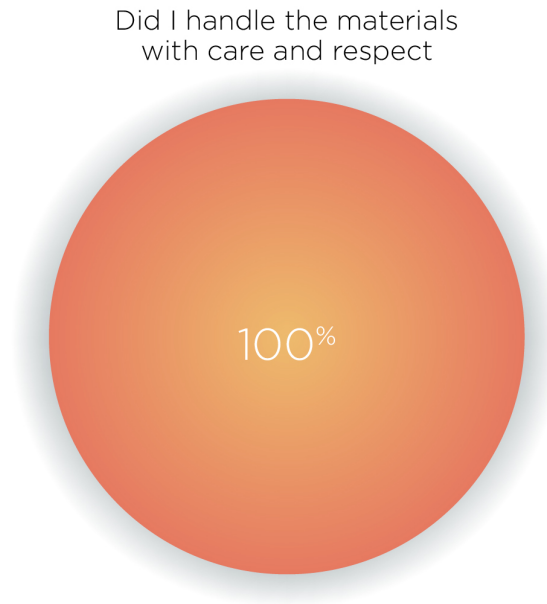


Figure 8.

This data from the student evaluation did not coincide with the any of the other data collection tools that showed carelessness in using the classroom materials. A possible explanation is that the children are earnestly doing their best, and that it is not so much a notion of carelessness and disregard, but rather haste and unawareness of the results of their actions.

Action Plan

My research showed that presenting daily grace and courtesy lessons has an overall positive impact on the environment. The goal was to instill within the students a higher level of respect and regard for the classroom materials. The results showed a slight increase in the proper use of classroom materials and particularly an increase in the children's preparation of a workspace before choosing a material. Other benefits included a decrease in the amount of materials left out when not in use and an increase in the return of materials to their original

place on the shelf. This study proves the benefits of demonstrating and modeling graceful and courteous behaviors within a classroom. This research reaffirms the Montessori philosophy of educating the whole child, and not just focusing on one area, such as academics.

A personal result from this study was a firmer belief in the need of a prepared environment for a Montessori classroom. Through my observations and assessment of the classroom, my senses became attuned to the order and beauty of the classroom shelves. This prompted me to a higher frequency of straightening and aligning materials on the shelves, as well as keeping the shelves dust free. By doing this I observed an increase in the children's attention to handling the materials with greater reverence. Straightening the materials on the shelf before the children arrived each morning allowed me to see how well the children were returning the materials to the original place on the shelf. In addition to this observation, it reminded me to conclude lessons with showing the children where the materials are to be returned after its use.

The impact of the instilling reverence of the materials in the children was the creation of a more orderly and often more peaceful environment. There were fewer instances of materials being misused or damaged. It is often typical in a Montessori classroom that when an adult observes a child misusing a material, the child is asked to cease working with the material until another lesson on how to use the material can be presented at a later time. During this study, the classroom children's work was less often interrupted through the intervention of the teacher. A positive result of the children's increased reverence for the environment not

only decreased teacher intervention, but also allowed for an increase in student/teacher interactions, such as lessons, personal conversations and teacher observations. This was an underlying goal in instilling reverence for the classroom. The more the students are independent and responsible for their own learning, the more learning and less redirection can occur.

A future research idea is to investigate the effect of morning arrival time on student work ethic. Greeting children each morning at the door is another grace and courtesy ritual that we began as a result of this study. Unfortunately, children would begin working but then be distracted each time a student would walk into the classroom. Ideally I would like to open my classroom door and welcome each child individually but immediately after the next. Having the children start their workday simultaneously might have a positive impact on the prepared environment altogether. Future research would involve studying the student's off-task behaviors verses on-task behaviors when the students all walk into the environment at the same time.

The results of this study demonstrate that presenting the grace and courtesy lessons in the six to nine year old classroom is just as important as presenting academic lessons. The results showed that with less adult redirection regarding the material, there was more opportunity to strengthen relationships, as well as explore more of the Montessori curriculum. Another reason to give this age group lessons in grace courtesy is because the six to nine year child is larger and the materials have many interdependent parts. The child's size impacts the way the child moves about the classroom. The elementary curriculum contains

smaller materials to aid in higher-level concepts, which requires an increase order of the environment, compared to the materials in the three to six year primary classroom. Along with order, organization and beauty are necessary as they serve as an invitation to the child. As the six to nine year child grows to be more community oriented, the desire and opportunity to work together is more present. Lessons in how to do so become crucial.

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Appendix A

1. How to shake someone's hand and make eye contact
2. How to carry a chair
3. How to greet a guest
4. How to roll silverware
5. How to express happiness for the success of others
6. How to walk on the right side of the sidewalk/hallway
7. How to wash a shelf
8. How to scrub a table
9. How to choose a work from the shelf
10. How to get by someone, and say, "please excuse me"
11. How to wash your hands and leave sink ready for another
12. How to walk on a line without spilling a drop of water from a full
cup
13. How to walk on a line carrying a bell and not making a sound
14. How to offer someone food or drink
15. How to arrange flowers
16. How to help someone with his or her coat
17. How to hold the door for someone
18. How to polish silver
19. How to scrub a chair
20. How to polish a mirror

Appendix B

AR Observation Record

Date: _____

Time of Day: _____

List of materials being used:

How materials are being used:

Appendix C

AR Environmental Assessment

Date: _____

Time of Day: _____

5= Desired 4=Acceptable 3= Needs improvement 2= Intervention needed 1=Complete Disrespect	5	4	3	2	1
Are the children using the material for its intended purpose?					
Are the children preparing a workspace before gathering materials?					
Are the children carrying the materials appropriately?					
Are the children using a work rug to keep the material off the floor?					
Are there any materials left out on the tables or work rugs, which are not in use?					
Are the materials being returned to their original place on the shelf?					