

The Benefits of Individual, Paired and Group Lessons in a Montessori Children's House

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Abstract

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Abstract

Presentations, or lessons, are one of the foundations for children’s learning in the Montessori environment. Maria Montessori contended that lessons should be given individually; however, through this study, the researcher explored the benefits of individual, group or paired lesson presentations. Results indicated that depending on the student, the lesson, and the guide there are different times when a teacher could benefit from the use of any of the three: group, paired or individual lessons. After interviewing several teachers, their input was analyzed to find patterns in why they chose group vs. individual lessons and the benefits or disappointments they have faced when giving group lessons. Some of the frequent reasons for choosing to conduct group lessons were: following the child or material to be presented works better in small groups such as grace and courtesy or golden bead addition. Individual lessons have benefits as well such as less distractions and lessons catered to each child’s specific learning needs.

Keywords: Montessori, presentations, group lessons, individual lessons, benefits

Literature Review

Introduction

Montessori lessons in a children's house are presented in different ways depending on the teacher and their training. Some teachers believe all lessons should only be given individually so the student has his focus on the work being presented and nothing else to distract him. Other teachers believe that lessons can be given in groups and the children are able to help each other learn what is being presented. There are many benefits to presenting Montessori lessons in a children's house individually as well as in groups.

Individual Lessons

According to Crystal Dahlmeier, "When Maria Montessori wrote of the lesson, she emphasized brevity, simplicity, objectivity, and *individuality*" (Dahlmeier, 1993, p. 30). Montessori wanted lessons to be just a brief time with the teacher so the child would know how to use the materials. After the presentation, the child was to explore the materials and really focus on all they could experience from them. Giving lessons should be done as an individual with no interruptions from other students asking for help (Roosten-Chotzen, 1983/4, p. 6). Presenting this way shows the observing child how to keep his focus on the task at hand instead of watching those around him.

Giving a lesson is such a special moment for each child, as he so looks forward to learning a new concept. When giving a lesson, the teacher's focus should be on the child she is working with, as it will just be a brief moment before she allows the child to work on his own with the material. A teacher working with a student individually encourages the student to see they are important and deserve special attention. This one on one lesson also allows the teacher

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to work with the child at his own level and interest (Jensen, 2004). A teacher guides the student through his learning journey by following the child. This might mean giving him a lesson on new work or showing him extensions or variation to a previous work that he truly enjoyed.

Working with a child one on one allows the teacher to customize the lesson just for the child she is working along side. If the student is picking up the lesson quickly, she can shorten the lesson in order to allow the student to begin the work. Also if the student is confused, the teacher can give more examples or give the lesson again in order for the child to see what she missed the first time. A teacher can also use the child's previous knowledge or experience in order to help the student connect to what they are working on (Frey, 2006, p. 211). A child is more likely to learn or comprehend what she is learning when it is connected to something practical or concrete in her life.

Another benefit of working alone is that the student is allowed to choose the work that interests him. The learning journey becomes self-directed, as the child is able to move from work to work as each item interests him. According to David P. Weikart, a student who has been allowed to work based on his own choice and his own interest has shown a long-term and positive effect on adult behavior.

For individual lessons to work, the child also must be an active learner (Jensen, 2004). The child must actively seek out works and follow a progression as he learns. Having children of different ages around him will encourage and foster an environment in which the child can create his own path of progression instead of following those in his same age group.

Group Lessons

However, many teachers believe that lessons should be given in groups allowing children to help each other. Maria Montessori believed that as children grew older more social interaction was needed. Children in the second plane of development, starting around age 6-12, benefit more from working in pairs or small groups in order to learn from each other. There are many reasons why teachers decide to give group lessons and there are some demonstrated benefits from working in groups in appropriate circumstances.

Teachers like to present in groups because they feel limited in time and want to ensure every child gets the lessons he might need. Children taught in smaller groups as opposed to a whole group are more likely to understand the concept being presented as well as ask more questions if the student does not understand. Teachers are also able to observe how the students respond and interact with the lessons being taught (Wasik, 2008, p. 515).

Presenting in groups allows the teacher to reach more students in a smaller amount of time than is possible when giving primarily individual lessons. Groups also allow students to be more social and talk through what they are working on with their peers. “Morrow and Smith’s (1990) research clearly showed that children learned more vocabulary words and comprehended the story better when the reading was done in small compared to large groups and to one-to-one instruction” (Wasik, 2008, p. 518). Working in groups teaches cooperation and patience. Students have to learn to work with the people in their group. An example of working together might be working on the geometric solids in the Sensorial area. The students may be taking turns on finding objects that match one of the solids in the environment. The first student would locate an object and the second student would have to either agree or disagree if it was the same shape. Doing an activity like this, the students have to learn to communicate with each other and

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discuss how they agree or disagree. Each student also has to wait for her partner to find the object.

Over time children who have been taught to work in small groups in the classroom are more likely to continue working in groups and stay on task while doing their group work. However, this is only true when a teacher puts more thought into the grouping of the children and creates groups that can support each other's needs rather than grouping based on friends or developmental strengths (Kutnick & Berdondini, 2009). A teacher also needs to plan time into her schedule to allow for group work. When it is scheduled time, a teacher is more likely to carefully plan the small group time as well as creating a plan for those not working in the small group with the teacher (Wasik, 2008, p. 518). Preparing children at a younger age for working in groups will give them the tools they need for success when they move up to an E1 or E2 classroom. Working in groups becomes essential in order to accomplish bigger projects in an E1 or E2 class. Group work becomes essential for students to begin seeing their bigger role in the classroom as well as in society (Donahoe, HildeBrandt Cichucki, Coad-Bernard, Coe, & Scholtz, 2013, p. 18).

Another area where it is almost impossible to give individual lessons would be Grace and Courtesy. Children need to practice skills such as: How to greet people, using manners, and passing through a small space. All these lessons need at least one other child present so they can demonstrate how to use polite words in order to achieve what we want (NAMTA, 1989/90). Maria Montessori also taught the Silence Game. In order for this to work, all children must participate and work together in order to create complete silence in the room (NAMTA, 1989/90, p. 7). The Silence Game is such a wonderful task which helps illustrate to the children how they are all interconnected. If one child decides to move, there is no longer silence in the room.

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Working together as a whole class creates a sense of community, which can prepare the children for future experiences (DiCarlo, p. 154). Creating a community in a Montessori environment is very important so that each child feels he is valued and can share his knowledge. A child who feels important is more likely to help himself, as well as others, when the need arises.

Working in groups prepares the children for future works in both the math and language areas (NAMTA, 1989/90, p. 10). Many more complex learning activities, found in both the math and language areas, need two or more people in order for the students to complete them. As children get older in the children's house, they begin to need more peer interaction to develop their social skills. Social skills can be encouraged by allowing the students to work together and begin to talk through what they are working on in order to complete the work. Children need to be taught how to work with each other and how to communicate with their peers in order to develop understanding.

Children learn through different styles. It is up to the teacher to know when and if group lessons will benefit her students. Many lessons can be presented as individual lessons first and then later presented as a group work for the students to further develop their understanding of the concepts. Children can benefit from both individual lessons and group lessons when presented correctly by the teacher. Teachers need to be continuously observing what children are doing. Are they completing their work? Are they choosing the works on their own at times? Does the child always want to work with a partner? What are some of the social benefits the child is receiving when working in a group?

Introduction

When I first started learning about Montessori, I was unsure how students could learn everything at their own pace in their own time. However, after studying Montessori I began to appreciate the deep need for the child to learn on his own. I also came to understand that to most effectively gain the knowledge and skills a young learner needs, it is best if the work is presented individually.

Throughout my observations of different Children's Houses (3-6yr old classrooms) and talking with fellow Montessori teachers I have begun to see a common theme; individual lessons are wonderful but not always practical. Group lessons can offer benefits as well as give students more opportunities to develop social skills. I have also started to understand that children may benefit from working in pairs and small groups as well as having lessons individually. The purpose of this study is to see how students benefit from individual, paired and group lessons.

What are the benefits of individual lessons, paired lessons and group lessons in a Montessori Early Childhood Classroom?

Subsidiary questions:

- 1) Are the benefits of group lessons greater for the older children?
- 2) What are the social benefits vs. the cognitive benefits of varied lesson structures?
- 3) What are some of the outcomes for children who have received group lessons? Do they complete the work on their own?

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Setting

The observations were conducted in a Children's House at a private Montessori preschool in a midwestern city suburb. The school has 7 classrooms, 4 children houses (31 months to 6 years old), 2 toddler rooms (12 months to 36 months), and an infant room (6 weeks to 16 months). The classroom is licensed for 30 children with 1 lead Montessori trained teacher, 1 assistant teacher and 1 aide.

Methodology

Participants

Part A

When the research first began the classroom being observed had 24 students enrolled with 1 Lead teacher and 1 assistant teacher. The students varied in age from 31 months to 5 years old. At the beginning of the year the classroom had 1 five year old, 14 four year olds, 6 three year olds, and 3 two year olds.

Part B

I interviewed different Montessori teachers. I asked them about their experience in the classroom and what they have observed with group lesson. I interviewed 10 different teachers from different schools in the Minnesota and Wisconsin area.

Procedure A

The children were observed weekly to watch for patterns on which works were being chosen, the time children stayed on task and children's repetition of work. The children were observed both during morning work time and afternoon work time. I would create a log and

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check every 15 minutes to see how many students were working individually, in pairs or in small groups of 3 or more (see Appendix 2). I would create tally marks to show this, and also place a tally mark as to whether the students were on task or off task at the time of checking. Students who were working in pairs or groups of 3 or more were documented as to which Montessori material they were working on together as well as some of their interaction to show if they were on task and able to work together with ease.

Procedure B

The classroom had changed so dramatically in participants and ages that it was no longer possible to keep up with the observations and permissions in order to continue Phase 2 of the study with the same design. Thus I decided to alter the design for Phase 2 of the study and started interviewing colleagues and fellow Montessori teachers currently working in a Children House in order to gain insight about their experiences in using individual, pair and group lessons. Interviews were video taped, voice recorded or collected using email in order to gather as much input from fellow teachers as possible (see appendix 3). Then interviews were then analyzed to find patterns in what teachers have said works well for group lessons and what does not. Teachers also expressed their views on why they like or dislike group lessons and their reasons behind presenting as they do.

Data Analysis/ Results

My overall goal of my research project was to see if students benefit from working in groups or pairs with lessons on Montessori works. While it is hard to give a simple answer, I

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can say there are benefits to individual, pair, and group lessons depending on the child, the material, and the guide.

When I first began my research, I observed my class as a whole. I tracked on an observation chart whether or not my children were on task or not every 15 minutes (see appendix 2). I kept track of the children's work habits for several weeks in the beginning and noted how many were working in groups, pairs or individually. Then I put the data together to see if there was a time in which the children work better in groups or if they chose to work in groups more during certain parts of the day. In the middle of the morning work time, around 9:30am, more children were off task than on task (see figure 1).

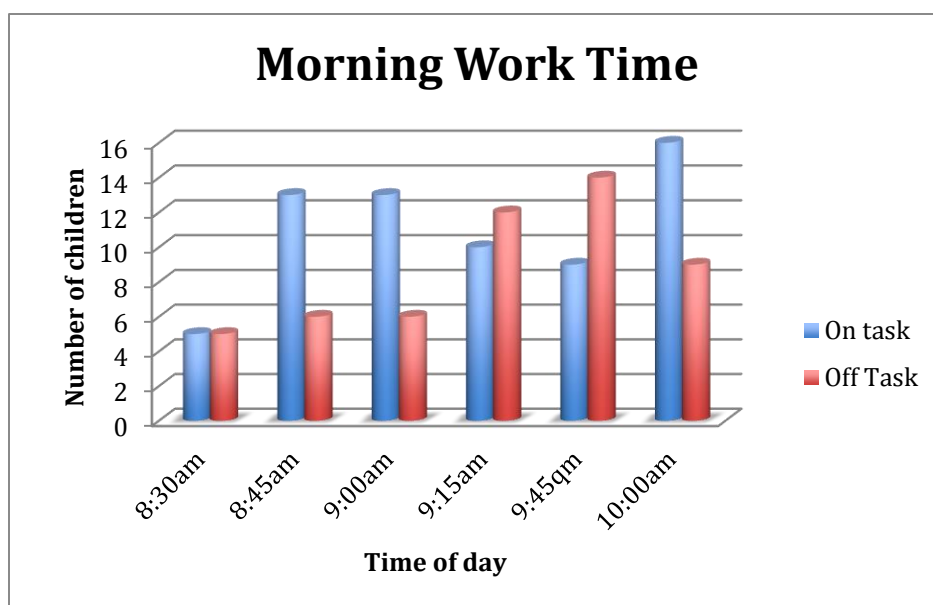


Figure 1. Students on task during morning work time.

In the morning time many students chose to work individually. Children enjoyed taking out their own work and getting their day started at their own pace. The classroom has many children under the age of 3 all working in the morning. Individual work is encouraged for the younger children so they may develop his or her own focus and concentration to prepare the child for the

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larger materials. Figure 2 shows that children begin doing paired work around 9:30 am.

Children, who are older than 4 years old, begin to seek each other out and look for works they can complete together. However, figure 3 shows the children beginning to become more off task as the work time progresses.

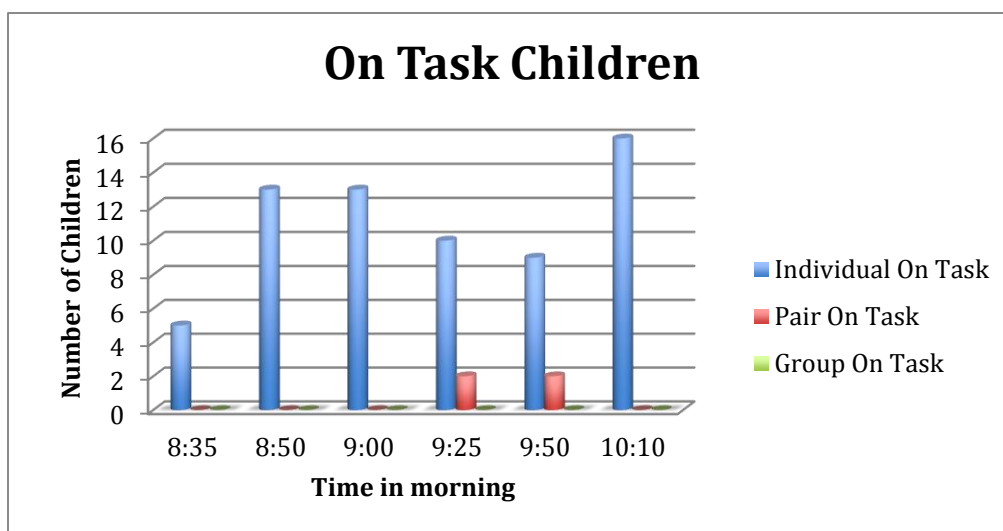


Figure 2. Children on task during morning working time.

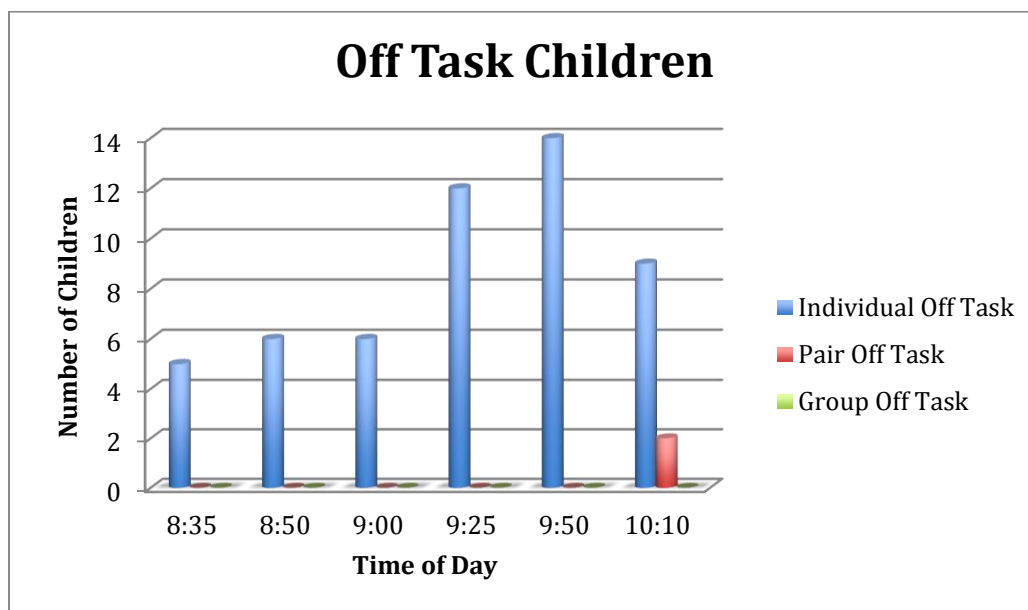


Figure 3. Children off task during the morning work time.

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The afternoon work time showed a difference in children's choice to work individually. In the afternoon, the children 3 and under are moved to another classroom to nap. Therefore, the afternoon group is only children 4 years and older. Children, who are at least 4 years old, begin to show a preference for working together. Also, in the classroom there is a second Montessori trained teacher who encourages the children to work together, or show each other works they have recently learned, because of this there are several children working in pairs and groups in the afternoon (see figure 4).

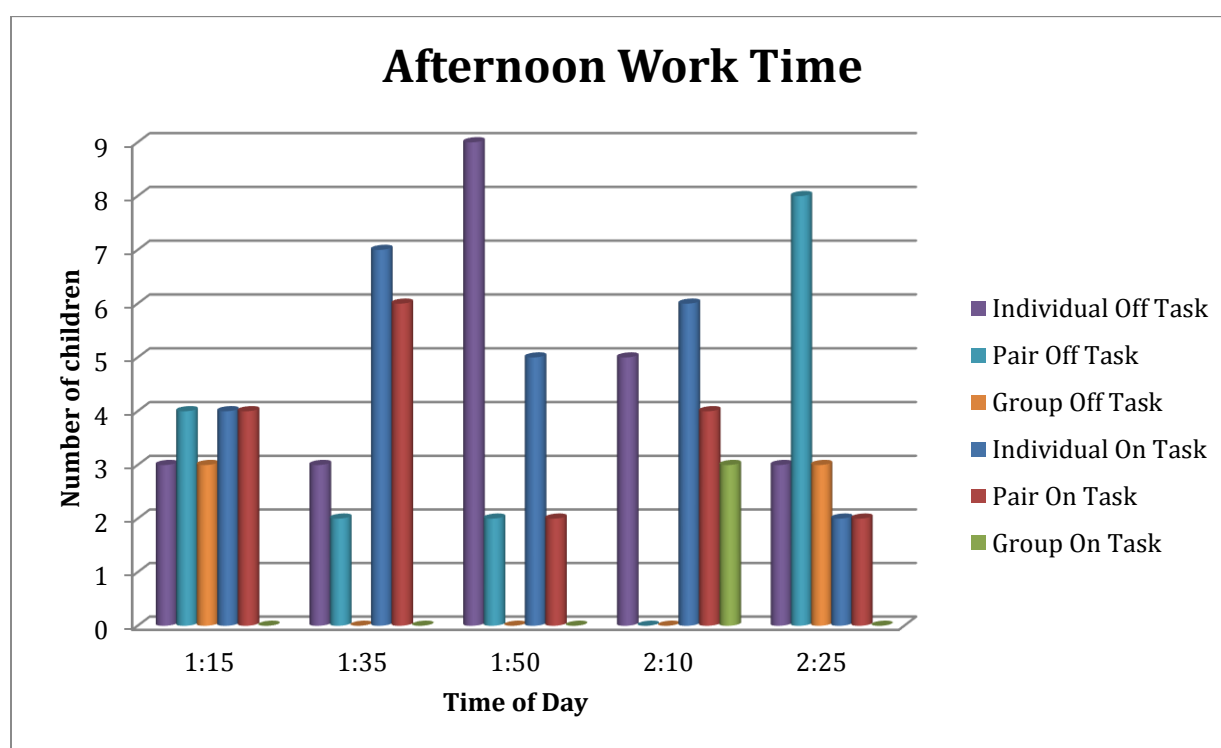


Figure 4. Children who are on or off task during afternoon work time.

Children in the afternoon show the same tendency to become less focused on the material as the work period progresses. There seemed to be a correlation between pair work and less on task, however, I was not able to collect enough data to fully investigate at this time due to changes in the classroom dynamic.

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When I first started my research, one question that kept haunting me was, “Why”? If Maria Montessori started with lessons being individualized, why did we change that and detract from the learning experience of the children, or at least that is how I saw it when I started. Talking with several current Montessori teachers, three main reasons could be heard through their answers: following the student, depending on the material, and lack of time seen in figure 5.

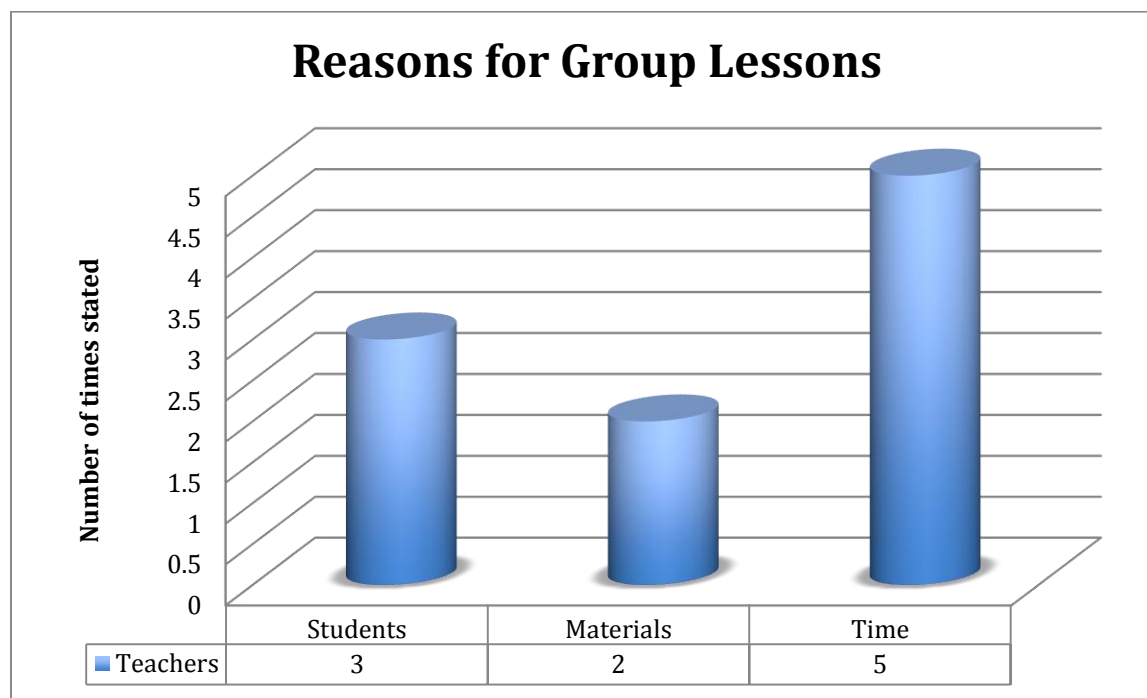


Figure 5. Reasons for group lessons

When looking at the reasons for group lessons, the first explanation (support of students) I heard from a few different teachers. It really resonated with me. The students are the only priority in the classroom, if a teacher is presenting a material and no student is interested then it should be taken off the shelf. It was stated best by Erin McFarland, “For those children that are 4 years old and older I do give them group presentations, because it is at this age that social work develops. Or as Matt Bronsil, a long-time Montessori teacher says, “The child’s main focus is ‘I

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want to work with my friend' (<http://montessorimatt.com/montessori/weekly20101128.asp>).

Thus, respecting this child's development phase is in showing them group work" (McFarland, 2015). Montessori created an environment in which the students are able to teach himself or a friend, as they grow older, as a teacher we should allow them the opportunity to do so without interrupting.

Along with following the child, some teachers gave group lessons based on the work they were presenting to the child, for example - Addition with Golden Beads. Addition with Golden Beads is a very large work that is best done with at least two people in order to make the workload more manageable. Children love to do this work because getting an accurate answer is dependent on a friend correctly bringing her number to the work mat. Friends are quick to help each other and check each other's numbers to ensure both get the right answer.

The third, and most talked about, reason teachers give group lessons is because of the time constraint felt to get the lessons taught to everyone who is ready in a short amount of time. Everyone is feeling the pressure to make sure children are learning as much as they can before they move on to the next school, next grade, next level. As a teacher, we all want the best for each of our students; however, we are limited to the time we have in our classroom. Because of this, many teachers give lessons in pairs or small groups to reach more children at one time. The teachers I talked to all mentioned having so many children it feels impossible to get to all of them. One teacher I talked with has 40 children in her classroom everyday so group lessons become a vital part of her day. I do not mean to imply that the teachers rush the lessons; all of them mentioned the importance of the child being ready for the material that was being presented to them. Each teacher makes sure the children will have success with the group lesson and encourage the children to work together and help each other.

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Another time constraint is the demands of the school. Schools all like to show their parents how their child is progressing so that means taking a break from giving lessons in order to assess the child. Most schools do this twice a year causing a big delay to some students who are interested and wanting to learn. One teacher stated she had started giving morning group presentations in order to give the children some lessons. However, she also felt that it has not always been successful (Krause, 2015).

Those interviewed had different examples for which material they use when giving a group lesson (see figure 8). Most commonly, teachers stated they give Grace and Courtesy lessons in groups as seen in Figure 6. The Montessori teachers I interviewed expressed a common theme of reviewing grace and courtesy lessons in small and large groups. According to Shloka Shroff, “In the beginning of the year, I have a lot of Grace and Courtesy lessons I present in group lessons and classroom lessons like rolling up a rug, how to move a table, how to pick up a chair” (Shroff, 2015). Many teachers felt it was also important to do this throughout the year in order to help the new students joining the class, as well as the students who may need a reminder on how to take care of the environment.



Figure 6. Children work in pairs to help each other get dressed in order to get outside in a timely manner.

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Teachers also have new students work with children who have been in the classroom for a while in order to encourage friendship. Evan, an older friend, shows Derek how to use the land, air, water work so that he can have a new lesson without waiting for a teacher (see figure 7).

Figure 7. Evan and Derek work together to complete Land, Air and Water.

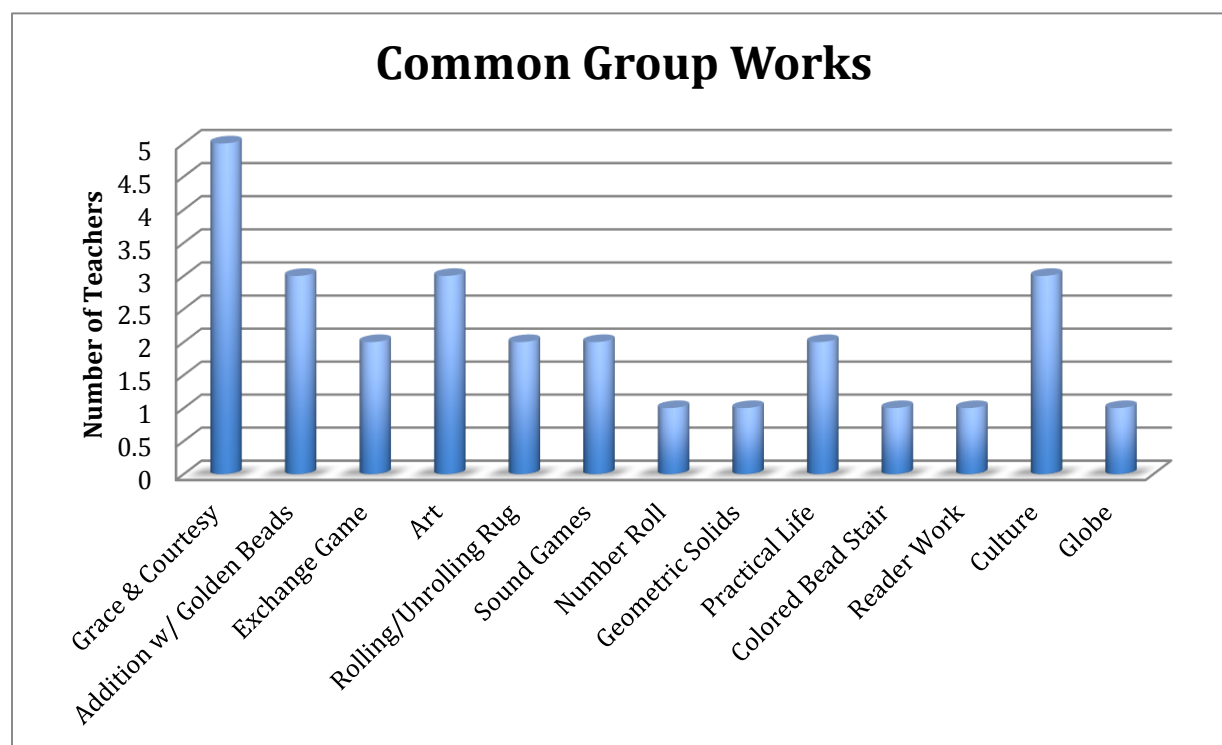


Figure 8. Work chosen for group lessons

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Teachers also expressed giving lessons on art works in groups, especially when it is a project for them to complete that has multiple steps such as lei making for Hawaii mentioned by Janet Krause (Krause, 2015). She found the work was so popular that she needed to give lessons in 2's or 3's in order to be able to present to all the students. Since students already had a basic understanding of art tools such as cutting, the children were able to complete the work without a lesson that was created just for them. Sheri Papke agreed with Janet, saying, "some of the basic art, like how to cut with scissors, or using glue I do that individually. It's more seasonal art that I show in groups" (Papke, 2015).

Math materials were agreed upon for most likely to be done in group lessons as long as it was a work like Addition with Golden Beads or Exchange game (see figure 8). Both these materials take a lot to set up and are usually accomplished with two or three students. The students enjoy being allowed to work with a friend and put their numbers together in order to create another number. The students also begin to see that it takes both children in order to create something much larger. However there are always exceptions, Mary, a 2 year old girl who was new to the classroom was having a hard time adjusting to the larger room. Tom and Andy decided it was up to them to help her get working and fit in the classroom. They quickly took her hand and told her they were going to work with her and show her number rods (see figure 9). They knew she was a younger friend and that she needed to start with a material they have not done in a while. They helped her set up a mat and showed her how to carry the number rods to the rug. The three children worked quickly to get the number rods set up in order on their mat. Once they had the material set up Tom and Andy showed Mary how to get out the extension sheet so she could take it home for Mom and Dad (see figure 10). They showed her how to get all the items in order to finish the sheet and helped her to get started on the work

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sheet. Tom stayed with her and encouraged her for working so hard (see figure 11). Both Tom and Andy knew she needed a new friend and they both worked hard to show her how we treat friends in the classroom.



Figure 9. Tom and Andy place numerals next to appropriate number rod. Mary watches from the side.

Figure 10. Tom and Andy help Mary get sheets, colored pencils and clipboards in order to complete the work.



Figure 11. Tom watches Mary fill in her sheet and helps her with the colors. Andy shows her where to look on the rod.

Working in groups allows the children to take care of their own environment and community.

Children learn to take care of each other and notice when someone is upset or hurt and they try to

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help or console their friends. Melissa Caramucci shared, “I think that there are times throughout the day that I look for opportunities for children to work together. Maybe it is an individual work that someone has been working on that someone needs a little bit of help. For instance, maybe it is someone who is working with the moveable alphabet and struggling to hear a sound or be unable to break the word apart. I might encourage them to seek help from another friend to help build that peer relationship but also allow for some of that self-directed teaching as well” (Caramucci, 2015).

Some teachers, however, had strong feelings about works needing to be mainly individual presentations. Sheri Papke stated, “...I think they miss out on the preciseness of an individual lesson so it becomes, ‘how can we make this work?’...for the most part it’s early childhood, it’s individual work” (Papke, 2015). Individual lessons allow the teacher to adapt and make sure the student has a full understanding of the work before the teacher leave her to finish.

An example where a more individualized lesson could have benefited two children was the paired lesson on red rods given to Perry and Cate. Both children were 3 years old and seemed ready for the lesson. We sat down together to complete the work. Cate instantly understood what was expected of her and how to tell which rod was the longest and where to place the rod. Perry, however, really struggled. He was unable to see the difference in lengths of the rods and therefore would not grade them from longest to shortest (see figure 12).



Figure 12. Perry has finished his turn with the red rods and believes they are ready to be placed back on the shelf.

Because the lesson was given to a pair of students, Perry did not get all the support he needed. Cate was more than able to complete the lesson so she did not need much encouragement from

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the teacher. This took away from what Perry may have gotten if the lesson was done individually.

Other teachers had the same concern saying their children do not always repeat the work when they have not been given an opportunity to practice individually. Many teachers felt that if the child did not have access to work with the material right after he had received a lesson, he would not touch the work at a later time either. Janet had found this to be very true. She had given a group lesson to three children for the Pink Tower. When the lesson was completed, one child was allowed to stay and use the material and the other two were asked to come back to it when it was available. She noticed that the two children who did not touch the Pink Tower did not return to it at all, whereas the one who did would return to the work. She felt that being able to manipulate the materials after the lesson cemented the learning for the child (Krause, 2015).

A child who has been given an individual lesson has more focus on his work (see figure 13). He generally will complete the work no matter what is going on around in the classroom. A child who has just received a lesson from the teacher is normally very excited to work with the material shown.



Carl completes teen board and beads. He only gets up to get a new number from teacher and then go right back to work to finish.

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Trey, who normally is very social, stays at his mat and completes the 100 Board after having a lesson on sorting the numbers.

Jake concentrates on moving gems from one bowl to another with tongs.



Figure 13. Children working individually

Discussion

There are many benefits of using group, paired and individual lessons. As children get older, they are able to learn more from working in groups than they learn from the material working with it alone. When children work in groups or pairs, they are also developing their social skills and ability to communicate. While these are important skills, children who are not socially or emotionally ready to develop them may not gain the same insight or knowledge as a student who is older may gain. In my experience, some children who have received group

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lessons enjoy completing the work as well as continuing to work on it at another time. Children from the afternoon group often would seek out a chance to work with a friend another day. Children who are older than 4, loved to show their friends works they had just learned and would ask them to complete it with them. However, students in the morning group, or younger than 4, struggled with working with friends. They would like to be near friends but often could not actually complete a work if they were sharing with a friend. When children under 4 would work together, often the work was misused or not completed because there was too much talking instead. I was unable to get solid data of social benefits verse cognitive benefits of varied lesson structures. However, Montessori teachers need to be sure that they know the child well enough to ensure that the lesson style they chose is right for that particular child. Teachers should not always choose group lessons just because there is a time constraint. They need to make sure it is in the best interest of the child. Some children need the extra socialization or help from a friend while another child may need to work on her own concentration and focus of the work. On the reverse side of that, teachers also should not give all lessons as individual lessons because many students gain great insight in working with peers.

Future Action Plan

I would like to continue my research and see if children who have been trained to work in groups continue to work well in groups throughout their time in a Children's House. As the children complete their three years in the Children's House, I think it would be interesting to know if they are more able to stay on task when they have been presented with a lesson on how to work in pairs or small groups. Is it possible to give this type of grace and courteous lesson

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when the child first enters the room at the age of three? I will continue watching for different social benefits and cognitive benefits children receive from different lesson presentations. I would like to take a closer look into how the older children can work or teach the younger children. I wonder if it is possible for the older children to give a quality presentation to a younger child without taking away an important step the younger child might need? Even after spending the last 8 months watching and observing students working together I still have so many questions I would like to follow up on. Small group work is something that interests me, as it seemed that Maria Montessori was so against it for young children and many Montessori teachers that I have worked with were as well. Yet, there are clearly times when children do benefit from small group instruction.

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Benefits of Group, Pair and Individual Lessons

Appendix 1: Parent Permission Letter

Private Montessori School
Minnesota, MN
United States

Dear Parents,

I am currently working towards earning my master for Montessori at University of Wisconsin River Falls; part of the process is for me to do some action research. I have chosen to look into some of the different benefits of individual, paired, and group lessons in the Montessori Children House. In order for me to do this, I will be observing the students in the room. I will be watching to see how they respond to the different lesson formats as I give them. Also, I will be watching to see if they choose to repeat the work, and if they choose to do so with a friend. I will be watching to see if giving group or paired lessons changes how the students interact with each other.

In order for this to happen I need your permission to use your child's results. I will be changing names of all the students in order to protect their identity. This project will be shared with my fellow classmates as well as educational communities' who are given access to the files. However, it will not be posted online for the general public. Any parent that would like a copy of my results is welcome to have it when I have completed the project.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary and confidential. Every child will be working in the classroom as a student but I will only use information I observe from your child if you agree to participate. Please sign your name if you are willing for me to use your child's results and return this form by November 11th.

I give permission for my child, _____, to participate in this research project.

Parent Signature_____

If you have any questions about the research project please feel free to contact me.

Ms. Francina

(Email and phone number provided)

If you have any questions about UWRF and the Action Research class I am taking please feel free to contact me or my advisor Gay Ward (email provided)

Thank you so much,

Ms. Francina

Children's House 1 Lead Teacher

Benefits of Group, Pair and Individual Lessons

Appendix 2: On task or off task tracking chart

Time	Students	On task	Off task
Individual			
Pair			
Group			

Time	Students	On task	Off task
Individual			
Pair			
Group			

Time	Students	On task	Off task
Individual			
Pair			
Group			

Benefits of Group, Pair and Individual Lessons

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

When do you give group lessons? What makes you decide to give a group lesson rather than individual?

Have you given a group lesson recently?

If yes,

How many in the group?

Can you tell me what happened?

Did students repeat the work?

Do the students do the work individually or in a group?

When do you think it is good to give group lessons?

Is there a work you always present as a group? Or an area you tend to present in groups?

Do you have an experience you would like to share of a group lesson?