



Homework Policy and Student Choice: Findings From a Montessori Charter School

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Abstract. The use of homework has been a controversial topic in education for many years: what types of homework to give, how much, and how often. In previous years, Ocean Montessori School (a pseudonym), the site of this study, offered homework like that of traditional public schools, such as worksheets and rote skill practice. Feeling conflicted about the misalignment between traditional homework and Montessori practices, the school administration changed the homework policy for the 2016–2017 academic year. The new policy encouraged students to choose what they wanted to do each night for homework. This study examines the views and practices of the teachers, students, and parents involved in the new homework policy. Data were collected from parent surveys, teacher focus groups, student interviews, observations, and student work samples. The findings indicate that, although students enjoyed the proposed homework change, it lacked sufficient structure for parents, and students needed support from teachers and parents to engage in meaningful homework tasks.

The use of homework has been a controversial topic in education for many years: What types of homework to give, how much, and how often? Currently, it is up to individual Montessori schools to make decisions on homework assignments, as no guidelines or suggestions are provided by the American Montessori Society (AMS), the Montessori Accreditation Council of Teacher Education (MACTE), the Montessori Educational Programs International, or the Association of Montessori Internationale/USA (AMI/USA). The Montessori Foundation (2017), however, advises that Montessori homework should be “meaningful, interesting assignments that expand on the topics that they are pursuing in class” (“Is Montessori Opposed to Homework Section,” para. 1), but it does not provide guidelines for teachers or families on how to implement these assignments.

Previously, Ocean Montessori School ([OMS]; a pseudonym), the site of this study, offered homework like that of traditional public schools, such as worksheets and rote skill practice. Dissatisfied with how this kind of homework failed to align with Montessori practices, the school administration decided to abandon traditional homework for the 2016–2017 academic year. Under the new policy, students were given a choice in what types of work to do. As researchers, we wanted to know what happened when such a policy was enacted and what challenges teachers faced when implementing the new policy. As such, this study followed the students in one classroom to see what types of work students selected and how and why they chose to present the homework to the class. In addition, OMS teachers participated in a focus group to share their homework practices and their thoughts about homework assignments and the new policy.

Literature Review

Because our research focused on homework, Montessori curriculum, and student choice, we provide a literature review of each of these topics, examining previous research on homework, particularly in the Montessori curriculum. It was important to determine how the new homework policy may align with key features of Montessori theory. Given the encouragement of student choice, an important factor in Montessori practices, we also looked for literature that discussed how student choice in homework affects student performance and engagement.

Homework

Much like other education-related topics, the reactions to homework have swung from one extreme to the other, particularly since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). Researchers found that homework has little impact on the academic performance of elementary-aged children (i.e., kindergarten through grade 5) but increases as students enter middle school (Cooper, 2001; 2006; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; DeNisco, 2013). Other researchers, however, recognized that homework can be appropriate in moderation for younger students, helping them develop self-regulation strategies (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011).

Early research on homework suggests that, while homework does not significantly affect elementary-aged children's performance on assessments, it does affect student attitudes (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998). Researchers found that homework was associated with negative student attitudes at the second- and fourth-grade levels (Cooper et al., 1998). Similarly, Galloway, Conner, and Pope's (2013) regression analysis found that students at the high school level reported increased stress and lower rates of well-being when the quantity of homework increased. However, research also showed that most parents (60%–75%) thought their child received an appropriate amount of homework each day; 55% of parents reported that their child had an hour or less of daily homework to complete (Brown Center on Education Policy, 2014; Noel, Stark, & Redford, 2016).

The focus of research on homework has shifted from student attitudes and appropriateness of homework in the late 1990s and early 2000s to the use of technology and differentiation strategies in completing homework assignments. In the last 5 years, research on homework practices at the elementary level focused primarily on three areas: technology, special education, and parent involvement. Studies focusing on technology examined the use of flipped classrooms (i.e., in which students learn content at home and online and complete corresponding activities in class) and student access to technology when completing assignments; they found that the use of technology and flipped classrooms increased student engagement and enjoyment of the learning experience (Gecer & Dag, 2012; Jeong, González-Gómez, & Cañada-Cañada, 2016; Schmidt & Ralph, 2016). The studies that focused on special education attended to student needs in completing homework, particularly for those with learning disabilities (Blichá & Belfiore, 2013; Little, Hart, & Schatschneider, 2016; Mautone, Marshall, & Costigan, 2012). These researchers noted that the challenges students experienced with homework varied depending on disability, medication, family support, and other factors.

The third area of homework research focused on parent involvement in homework. Studies such as that by Núñez, Suárez, Rosário, Vallejo, Valle, and Epstein (2015) found that parental involvement with homework had a greater effect on academic achievement in the middle and high school levels than in elementary school. Ndebele (2015) found that parents of higher socioeconomic status were more active in their children's homework completion than those of lower socioeconomic status were. Finally, the ways in which parents were involved in homework had a direct effect on student performance; autonomous support (e.g., scaffolding the experience without doing the child's work or using punitive measures) led to greater academic success for students than other methods of parental assistance (Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Silinskas, Kiuru, & Aunola, 2015). Interestingly, most homework-related studies occurred outside of the United States, leaving a gap in the literature.

It should be noted that only one study in the last 10 years investigated homework in a Montessori context. The authors, Bagby and Sulak (2014), provided a synopsis of educational research on the effectiveness of homework or any assignment completed outside of school hours. The authors noted that AMS has not set a standard regarding homework in the Montessori classroom, nor does it include homework in its curricula. Bagby and Sulak (2014) shared in their analysis that, similar to children in non-Montessori classrooms, Montessori children can benefit from homework that focuses on mathematics, that is task oriented, and that reinforces skills taught in the classroom (Maltese, Tai, & Fan, 2012; Trautwein, Köller, Schmitz, & Baumert, 2002). Their analysis is largely grounded in the seminal work of Cooper and colleagues (2006).

The lack of research in Montessori homework practices, and in homework in the United States in general, presents a significant gap in the literature. We assume that, without a policy to guide homework practices, homework will vary from classroom to classroom (or school to school) and will be influenced by teachers' perceptions and views of what is considered necessary for homework or not, and that our findings will add to the literature base on these topics.

Montessori Curriculum

In the Montessori classroom, children work together in multiage groups. Primary classes consist of children aged 3 through 6 years, Lower Elementary children are in grades 1 through 3, and Upper Elementary children are in grades 4 through 6. These age groups align with what Maria Montessori deemed *sensitive periods*, or opportunities for significant growth and development. These growth periods affect not only children's academic understanding but also their social growth, ability to cooperate with peers, and sense of community responsibility (Lillard, 2016; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2014).

Montessori teaching methods focus on a triad: the teacher, the learner, and the environment. The classroom allows opportunities for long periods of uninterrupted work and choice in work activities. Many of the lessons and student-centered activities emphasize students' ability to manipulate concrete Montessori materials that enhance their understanding of abstract concepts. This environment provides access to needed Montessori work materials and an open space for work completion, as well as the opportunity to work with others. The teacher serves as a guide for the child by assisting in developing work plans, teaching lessons, and overseeing each child's progress (Lillard, 2016).

Over the last 5 years, Montessori research has focused primarily on teacher autonomy in the classroom, examining how Montessori teachers use Montessori methods to meet the needs of diverse students (Ansari & Winsler, 2014; Carver-Akers, 2013; Danner & Fowler, 2015; Debs & Brown, 2017; Donne & Briley, 2015; Lillard & Heise, 2016; Peng & Md-Yunus, 2014; Steiner, 2016; Tobin, Boulmier, & Zhu, 2015). A second research focus emerges from the use of Montessori methods to develop play and physical motor skills in young students (Bhatia, Davis, & Shamas-Brandt, 2015; Lillard, 2013; Pate, O'Neill, & Byun, 2014). As stated earlier, only one study has examined the links between Montessori methods and homework (Bagby & Sulak, 2014).

Neither AMS (2016) nor the Montessori Foundation (2017) has established formal homework guidelines for the Montessori program, leaving teachers to determine what will work for their students and school. Challenges to determining appropriate homework include limited access to Montessori materials at home—one of the foundations of the curriculum—and determining ways to allow student choice in homework tasks that meet students at the appropriate developmental level.

Student Choice

Vatterot (2010) noted that allowing ownership and competence in assignments are two hallmarks of good homework for any school setting, not just the Montessori classroom. Students have different interests and academic needs, and assignment of inappropriate homework tasks may rob the task of pleasure if requirements are too strict or if the student is unable to complete the task (Vatterot, 2010). Similarly,

Patall, Cooper, and Wynn (2010) suggested that when students are provided choice in homework, they feel a greater sense of competence and intrinsic motivation, and they perform better on related tests. Patall et al. also concluded that a choice in homework did not affect the time individual students spent on the assignments (2010).

Wharton (2001) concluded that, although homework is developed and assigned by adults, it is little studied from students' perspective, leaving a gap in recent homework-related literature. Research into the role of homework in a Montessori curriculum and the effects of homework choice on student interest is valuable to schools and teachers considering implementing homework practices in classrooms, as well as to teacher education programs that prepare future Montessori instructors. According to Montessori philosophy, allowing students to choose their work enables them to find their own motivation to learn and discover (AMI/USA, n.d.).

With this information, we were curious: If homework is not critical for the Lower Elementary grades, can it be used in the Montessori curriculum as a tool to encourage choice and sustain student interest in learning? How can students use homework as a tool to stimulate their interest in learning, and what challenges will teachers face as they attempt to facilitate these opportunities for students in a Montessori classroom?

The current case study examines the ways in which OMS modified homework practices and shares the challenges faced by teachers as they adjusted to a new homework policy. Based on the findings, we outline considerations for Montessori schools contemplating new homework policies based on the lived experiences of the students and teachers at OMS

Methods

Context

Ocean Montessori School (OMS) is a public charter school in the southeastern United States. The school district has 10 elementary schools and serves 9,721 pre-K–12 students. The only charter school in the district is OMS, which opened in 2012 and serves 216 students in grades 1 through 7; grade 8 was added in 2017. Parents founded the school, and, although it is held to the same accountability standards as public schools in the district, OMS allows teacher autonomy in classroom structure and planning, provided they follow the Montessori principles and learning cycle. OMS follows a 3-year learning cycle with its students; students remain in the same classroom for 3 years, with the goal of mastery of the Montessori curriculum materials at the end of the cycle.

OMS is located in an affluent town with a median annual income of \$100,000, more than double the state median. The unemployment rate is below the national average, and the median home price is approximately \$300,000. OMS is a non-Title 1 school, and 24% of students receive free or reduced lunch, differing significantly from that of the overall district, where nearly 80% of students receive free or reduced lunch¹.

In the 2016–2017 academic year, OMS changed its homework policy; prior to that year, teachers had sent home math and language worksheets for students to complete each night. The new homework policy, begun in August 2016, discontinued the use of worksheets, instead allowing students to self-select a homework activity for each evening. Students were expected to select activities that enabled them to try new things, help their families, or benefit the community. Teachers determined if and when students would present their work in their classrooms (e.g., daily, once per week). The homework policy provided to parents requested that parents provide their child with opportunities for self-discovery and learning that continued from the school into the home, rather than traditional worksheets or rote skills practice (OMS 2016–2017 Parent Handbook). Parent guidelines also recommended that children participate in physical activity,

¹ It should be noted that the school has addressed and continues to work on its lack of diversity, as compared to the local district, through both charter goals and outreach efforts.

community service, reading, household responsibilities, and other similar Montessori-based activities, and that they keep a record of their at-home activities and experiences in a journal or other approved medium (OMS 2016–2017 Parent Handbook).

The new policy was implemented in a top-down manner: teachers were not asked for their input or feedback at the time the policy was written, and they did not see the policy until they reviewed the new parent handbook, thereby limiting their opportunities to revise the policy or express concerns. Neither were teachers provided any training in the policy; as a result, some teachers opted to look online for sample homework ideas to share with their students, and others provided no guidance for parents. An electronic newsletter informed parents of the new homework policy, but there were no parent trainings or family nights to discuss the new homework policy or to share examples of appropriate work.

Participants

We surveyed all lead teachers in the Lower Elementary (grades 1 through 3) and Upper Elementary (grades 4 through 6) classrooms at OMS ($N = 8$) about the changes in homework and the implications for their students. From the lead teacher group, we examined the types of homework brought in by the students at each grade level and the ways in which they chose to share their homework with others. In this paper, we share our findings from the Lower Elementary class of “Shana” (a pseudonym). We collected student data from Shana’s class because we could visit her classroom regularly during homework-sharing sessions and because the homework in her class was similar to the homework completed by students in other classes. Shana was in her fourth year of teaching in the Montessori Method at the time of the study; she had become certified in Montessori teaching through an MACTE-accredited and AMS-affiliated teacher education program after volunteering in her son’s Montessori class. Her class was composed of 25 students: eight in first grade, seven in second grade, and 10 in third grade. Table 1 describes the teachers and their grade levels.

Table 1

Characteristics of Teachers at Ocean Montessori School

Teacher pseudonym	Elementary level taught	Experience (years)
Shana	Lower	4
Patricia	Lower	21
Anne	Lower	18
Julie	Lower	14
Susan	Upper	22
Alisa	Upper	3
Hannah	Upper	8
Meghan	Upper	16

Data Sources

The following methods were used to collect data on Montessori homework practices and student choice in homework.

Parent Survey. A survey was developed in SurveyMonkey and sent to the families of all OMS students (see Appendix A). Parents completed a survey regarding the homework practices of the school. The survey questions used a Likert-type scale for parents to rate the frequency of homework-related behaviors and their perceptions of the homework policy from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

An open-response option was also available for parents to share additional thoughts about homework. The survey was distributed via the school's weekly electronic newsletter from January through February, and the link was also shared on the school's Facebook page.

Student Work Samples. Students presented or turned in their homework weekly. Samples from Shana's class were collected monthly from August 2016 through March 2017; samples were not collected from November through January because of school holidays. We analyzed student work to see what types of homework were completed and how students chose to share their work (e.g., journal, blog, video), as well as what students self-reported—in both journals and interviews—about what they had learned through their homework assignments.

Student Interviews. We interviewed eight students from Shana's classroom about their homework practices (see Appendix B). Because only second and third graders in her class were required to complete a homework journal, we interviewed only students from those grade levels. There were 15 second- and third-grade students in Shana's class. Eight of those students returned the informed consent form, and those students were interviewed. We made copies of the eight students' homework journals and interviewed the students during the school day. Interview questions pertained to the completion of journals and student reports of what they learned from completing their homework. All interviews were completed in the third and fourth months of the school year and were audio recorded for accuracy.

Teacher Focus Group. The teachers were interviewed midway through the school year (i.e., January) to gain a sense of their perspectives on the school's new homework policy. The interview questions for the teachers (see Appendix C) focused on four aspects: their thoughts about changes to the homework policy, the homework they assigned, student completion of the homework, and students' responses in their homework journals. The focus-group interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio recorded.

Observations. We observed students' homework presentations to examine (a) what students chose for homework topics, (b) how they presented these topics, and (c) what they learned through completing their chosen work. Observations included detailed field notes (Spradley, 1980/2016) and a contact summary sheet (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Observations occurred at the end of each month from August 2016 through March 2017 (excluding November through January because of school holidays).

Data from each source were triangulated to verify accuracy of interpretations; for instance, to confirm validity across sources, teacher comments from the focus-group interview were compared with student work samples and the parent-survey data. In addition, member checking was used to ensure that participants' comments were accurately represented.

Results

Teacher Views on Homework: Ocean Montessori School

Teachers started the academic year with anticipation of the new homework policy, noting that it better aligned, in their views, to the Montessori philosophy of following the child. However, when sharing in the focus-group interview at the midpoint of the school year, many teachers' perspectives on the new homework policy and its effects on their students had changed.

All four teachers in the Upper Elementary classrooms noted that they had reverted back from the new homework policy to traditional homework practices. Rather than allow student choice on the homework, they were using state test-practice books for homework. One teacher switched to traditional homework 2 weeks into the school year, while the other teachers made the switch right after the winter break. When asked why, teachers said they were getting "laundry lists" from students of assignments and after-school activities, rather than activities that encouraged writing and thinking. "Susan," an Upper Elementary teacher, said, "What they were doing wasn't of quality. It was 'I woke up. I helped mom peel a carrot.'" Another Upper Elementary teacher, "Alisa," said that "for two or three kids, they had the same activities every day after school. Even if we told them that, it was all they did: dance, youth group, dance."

Similarly, “Hannah” felt that after the novelty of choosing homework wore off for students, the quality of their work declined, in both selected tasks and written reflections.

In the Lower Elementary classrooms, teachers’ views on the new homework policy varied. “Patricia” expressed concern that children were not doing enough math and that she was spending excessive amounts of time creating individual plans for student homework. As she stated:

So I realized right away, because of my own kids and classroom, no one was doing any math. What I would do weekly is suggest things for each kid. It took most of Tuesday to write out my suggestions. I was interjecting the math [assigning math homework] because it wasn’t being chosen naturally unless you have a mathematician at home. I introduced the change after two to three weeks [from when school started] because I knew right away kids weren’t getting it. We wanted that reinforcement at home that I wanted to do as a parent.... But the point was that I was having to direct all of it, and I could not physically keep up.

Patricia opted to send traditional workbooks home with students to ensure that parents and students knew how to complete the assignments, although this practice (and her decision to “direct all of it”) did not align with student choice, as the new policy intended. Similarly, Shana found that while some students completed new homework options with success, others had a difficult time:

We started with the plan, and I wasn’t getting back consistent responses. Parents would say we already do this—how to do laundry, fold, he helps in the kitchen every night. That’s what I was finding—that wasn’t consistent enough. A small group would try new things and reflect, but that was a very small number.

Like Patricia, Shana chose to send home workbook activities focused on word recognition and math facts.

Interestingly, two other Lower Elementary teachers tried to balance old homework expectations with new homework expectations, rather than abandon one for the other. One teacher, “Anne,” said,

I started the year with just the new homework. At first I was getting this whole calendar laundry list of things. I asked that the kids do a reflection instead—What did they do, what did they learn, in what ways did this have a positive impact? We got away from the calendars and the parent-created work. It was like the same eight kids, consistently, week after week, would share really cool things, like sock puppets. And then the whole class was like, “I want to do that,” and two days later, five more kids would come in with sock puppets.

In Anne’s class, some students still participated in the homework choices, as they were opting to try new activities and share these with their classmates. Others, however, did not understand that completing these new activities was their actual homework, so Anne provided these students with more structured homework, sending home traditional math worksheets. Similarly, “Julie” preferred the new homework policy but recognized that some parents needed more support:

I love the homework policy, and maybe I’m in the minority, but it’s working great for us. Every Tuesday, before morning meeting, we’d split into groups. I have those kids that did impressive, meaningful things, and I take pictures of them and send them to the parents for inspiration. I take notes beside those two to three kids doing laundry lists and would say, I want you to do this again, but add these things.... Fortunately they tend to do it once I say that. Every week on my parent update is what I am teaching. Third years are working on this—here are some websites to help you. I’m giving some suggestions because I’ve found my parents are on two different extremes. Some loved doing something cool every week; others freaked out, saying “I don’t know what to do....”

Most notable from the focus-group discussion was the lack of consistency in homework implementation, not just between Lower and Upper Elementary but also among teachers at the same grade

level. Some teachers sent home weekly packets for students to complete, some sent work home daily, and some expected students to prepare homework to share each Tuesday in the classroom. Other teachers opted to send home a list of suggested starter activities for students to complete as homework; for instance, one list included suggestions such as “Try a new chore at home,” “Go outside on a nature walk and write about your observations,” and “Cook dinner with your parents.” The school director, who observed the focus-group interview, had not realized how differently teachers implemented homework practices.

Given the teachers’ concerns about homework in each classroom, we asked teachers whether they noticed any changes in student performance on standardized measures of assessment (e.g., the Measures of Academic Progress) that could be attributed to the policy change. Not one teacher saw any effects on student performance—positive or negative—after the transition. When asked why she continued to assign homework, “Allyson” was succinct in her response:

I don’t see how I can achieve the goals put on me by the parents and the state without sending [traditional] work home. I would do it [stop assigning homework] in a minute. No homework, no grading. I have to send it home so I can be accountable.

Other teachers, both those using choice homework and those using traditional homework, felt that assigning homework helped students practice skills and develop a sense of responsibility.

Parent Perceptions of the Homework Policy

A total of 46 (22%) parents and guardians responded to the survey; 22 (47.8%) respondents had children in the Lower Elementary classes, and the rest had children in the Upper Elementary classes (52.8%). Nearly half of respondents (44%) noted that their child received a combination of assigned homework and choice homework, while 35% stated that their child received only assigned homework (see Table 2).

Table 2

Parent Responses to Homework Survey Questions

Question	Response (%)					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	1	2	3	4	5		
I am pleased with the new homework policy.	10.26	17.95	28.21	30.77	12.82	3.18	1.19
The new homework policy better suits my child’s needs.	17.95	15.38	20.51	33.33	12.82	3.08	1.33
I prefer the old homework policy.	31.71	17.07	34.15	12.20	4.88	2.41	1.19
My child spends an excessive amount of time on homework each day.	22.50	45.00	15.00	2.50	15.00	2.42	1.30
My child has enjoyed the new homework opportunities.	17.95	7.69	33.33	28.21	12.82	3.10	1.11
My family enjoys working on new homework projects together.	13.95	18.60	25.58	34.88	6.98	3.02	1.18

Note. 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree. Total of percentages is not always 100 because of rounding.

Parent reactions were generally favorable to the new homework policy. Almost half of respondents (48%) preferred the new homework policy to the old policy, and 30% expressed no preference. As one parent shared, “Our new homework policy has been wonderful for our child. She helps with our pet’s care, preparing meals for the week, laundry, caring for grandparents, cleaning, budgets for our household and daily exercise.” On the other hand, other parents were concerned that the new plan hindered their child. A parent noted that the new plan “lacked the structure and routine that my child needs for success. We worked out a plan with my child’s teacher to provide structure and routine similar to the old policy. My child has been successful with our plan.”

Over two thirds (67%) of parents believed that their child had a reasonable amount of homework each day; 39% noted that their child completed 15 to 30 minutes of homework each day. However, parents’ greatest concern about the discontinuation of nightly homework, which they believed reinforced what their child learned at school, was that it prevented them from tracking their child’s academic progress. Parents repeatedly reported being uncertain of their child’s progress; one parent said:

I feel that, on paper, the new homework policy sounds great, but after a month of doing it, I did not feel that my child was getting anything out of it, and it gave me no indication of how or what my child was doing in class weekly.

Some parents preferred teacher-assigned homework, believing it allowed them to better help their child and to “see what and how [my] child is doing with their classwork.”

Student Views of Homework at Ocean Montessori School

Shana’s Class. While student views of the new homework policy were generally positive, it should be noted that some students did not complete any homework at all, which is not atypical of K–12 classrooms in general (MetLife, 2007). A parent’s handwriting could be spotted in several parts of one student’s journal. At least two students were told by their parents what to do for homework, undermining student choice in activities. Half of the students interviewed reported participating in approximately the same activities every week, such as completing chores and participating in extracurricular activities; all students said they would have taken part in these activities even if they had not been required to complete a homework journal.

While the homework led five of the eight students to try at least one new activity, these new activities were mostly additions to their preexisting chores, such as simply increasing responsibility for the care of pets. Students wrote about their chores, clubs, and sports, but their entries were repetitive. For example, a third grader stated that he liked to have a choice in his homework because “you can do your chores and your homework at the same time”; however, his journal looked almost the same every week, and he wrote only about learning responsibility from these chores. A second grader noted her struggle with traditional homework from previous years, saying “it was kind of boring because we had to do all of these math problems, and a lot of them I didn’t really understand.”

These results depart from the Montessori view that, for the development of a child’s sense of pride and accomplishment, work at home should be self-driven (Lillard, 2016). The few students who had tried new activities and actively reflected on their experiences demonstrated an increased interest in learning and trying new activities that interested them and their families.

Discussion

The move to a nontraditional homework plan was fraught with challenges for OMS. In their attempts to balance Montessori principles with the mandates of public-school accountability, teachers struggled to simultaneously achieve two goals: follow the child and facilitate student success. This endeavor was not unlike the school’s challenges in juggling the demands of being a Montessori school, a charter school, and a member of the public school system (see Scott, 2017). As a result, homework shifted—predominantly in the upper grades—from student-selected work to rote skills practice. Because teachers

had little to no opportunity to provide feedback on the new policy or to receive training in its implementation, there was little consistency among classroom practices. Teachers were concerned about students' lack of creativity in completing nontraditional homework, yet parents struggled with loose interpretations of what constituted an appropriate homework assignment.

Although many parents appreciated the freedom of the new homework policy, they also struggled. Many were unsure of what was expected of their child, and some expressed concern about not knowing how their child was performing in school. Several factors contributed to this uncertainty: (a) a lack of communication from the school, (b) differing opinions among teachers regarding what constitutes acceptable homework (e.g., Do after-school activities count?), (c) a lack of communication from teachers regarding overall student progress, and (d) a change from the structured work of the traditional public-school setting. The uncertainty was evidenced by the disparate homework practices: some students repeated weekly activities, some students' parents completed student work, and other students turned in no work at all. This lack of consistency across grade levels and classes was problematic for families, as with children in the Lower Elementary classes were generally allowed more choice in the work they completed, while siblings in the Upper Elementary classes completed more-traditional homework. Parents were provided little guidance in helping their child, instead relying on teachers to communicate what needed to be done each week for homework. This lack of guidance was complicated by some teachers' reversion, in their attempts to meet state accountability guidelines, to traditional homework methods.

Despite the challenges, there were benefits to the new homework policy. Many parents noted that the new policy inspired their child to provide more help at home with chores, which was confirmed in student journal responses. The concept of children completing chores for personal enjoyment and a sense of purpose is not unusual; Dr. Montessori herself noted that providing children with these opportunities at home encourages responsibility and self-pride (Lillard, 2016). Children who had previously had a difficult time completing work enjoyed the flexibility of the new policy, and their parents appreciated the opportunities to try new activities as a family. Additionally, most parents indicated that their child received an appropriate amount of homework each night.

Implications

Many factors should be considered when implementing a homework policy in the Montessori classroom. Dr. Montessori advocated that work at home, like work at school, be child driven, noting that work loses value when its goals are no longer pride and accomplishment (Lillard, 2016). As witnessed at OMS, a clear and consistent set of expectations is needed across classrooms, as well as more parent education about how to provide support at home. To better understand what is expected of their child, parents need schools to provide suggestions for student activities. Moreover, while the notion of student choice in homework may align with Montessori ideals, the practice can be challenging when parents struggle with helping their child decide what to do for homework. To promote student choice, teachers should consider providing parameters for homework completion. For example, students could complete a Daily Life assignment one day and focus on botany or nature studies another day. Teachers and schools must also share Dr. Montessori's philosophy with families, so that parents can continue to follow the child's lead at home by encouraging them to further their interests. While parameters may limit choice, they also help parents better support their child at home and establish a foundation upon which to start selecting appropriate homework activities.

When modifying homework practices, teachers also should develop methods to communicate clearly with parents about their child's progress in the classroom. The greatest concern of parents in this study was the lack of knowledge about their child's performance. There are times when homework allows a parent to see the areas in which their child is successful or struggling, and less-restrictive homework may diminish these opportunities.

Finally, one must question the benefits of homework at the elementary level. It may be that teachers, while attempting to align homework choice with Montessori principles, inadvertently create more work for

themselves. Further, schools should engage teachers in the development and execution of any homework policy from its inception. Future research on these changes, including more consistent structure and teacher expectations across classrooms, will help determine whether Montessori principles and homework practices can be designed to benefit learners across both similar and diverse settings.

Limitations

Several limitations are associated with the use of OMS as a study site. The small sample size limits this study's findings: they may not be generalizable to the Montessori classroom at large. As was previously noted, the demographics of wealthy OMS families are very different from those of the surrounding district. The demographics of the student population itself also limit the findings; results may differ at larger schools with more diverse student populations. The lack of consistency in homework requirements across classrooms presented another limitation, making the collection of data more difficult. Finally, although parents were asked to complete a survey for each child, some parents may have completed only one survey for the whole family, thereby affecting survey results.

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Appendix A Parent Homework Survey

For parents/ guardians with more than one child: please fill out the survey separately for each child. Therefore, if you have two children, please complete the form twice while thinking of a specific child during each completion if you are willing and able to do so. This will ensure a more accurate collection of data from our parents about our homework.

1. Please check the most appropriate description of your child's homework.

- My child does not have homework
- My child is given assigned homework by the teacher (e.g., worksheets, reading passages)
- My child chooses what to do for homework
- My child has a combination of free choice and assigned homework

2. How many days per week do you:

	0	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Remind your child that (s)he has homework	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Help your child with homework	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tell your child what to write for homework	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Complete, or write, your child's homework for her/him	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tell your child that (s)he does not have time to complete homework that day due to other factors (i.e. sports, music lessons, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have your child participate in a new activity for homework	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. On average, how much time does your child spend on homework activities each night?

- 0-15 minutes
- 15-30 minutes
- 30-45 minutes
- 45-60 minutes
- 60-90 minutes
- 90-120 minutes
- more than 120 minutes

4. Please select the most appropriate response.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am pleased with the new homework policy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The new homework policy better suits my child's needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I prefer the old homework policy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have seen no change in the type of homework required from last year to this year.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a clear understanding of the homework expectations for my child's class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The teacher communicates with us regarding homework expectations for our child.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My child spends an excessive amount of time on homework each day.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My child has enjoyed the new homework opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My family enjoys working on new homework projects together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the school's homework policy and your child?

6. For demographic purposes, please share the grade level of your child:

- Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School

Appendix B **Student Interview Questions²**

Can you tell me a little about what you've been doing for homework?

How do you pick what to do for homework?

Does your teacher assign certain homework for you to do?

Does anyone at home help you with your homework? (If so, how do they help you?)

Do you enjoy doing your homework? Why or why not?

What is your favorite homework that you've done so far? Why is it your favorite?

How does your homework this year compare with your homework from last year?

Do you do homework every day? How long do you think it takes you to do it?

What have you learned from doing your homework? Can you share an example?

² Additional questions were asked, as needed, based on student responses.

Appendix C **Teacher Interview Questions³**

Do your students have certain guidelines or schedule that they must follow for their homework?
If so, describe them.

How many of your students complete homework, and how often?

What types of homework do your students complete?

What made you decide to require X for homework?

How many of your students are reflecting on their homework activities?

- What types of reflections do they complete?
- Are the reflections up to your standards? Why or why not?

How often do you check your students' homework?

How often do you provide your students with feedback on their homework?

How has the new homework policy worked/not worked in your class?

- What are the benefits of the policy?
- What are the challenges of the policy?
- What might you change about the policy, and why?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

³ Additional questions were asked, as needed, based on student responses.