Supporting Independent, Social Conflict Resolution Through Social/Emotional Learning Interventions in a Montessori Classroom

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A Master’s Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Education - Montessori

University of Wisconsin – River Falls
2019
Abstract:

Social conflict is a natural and sometimes frequent occurrence in an early childhood classroom. It is important for the teacher to prepare herself and the children for when social conflict inevitably arises. Conflict should not be viewed as something negative but rather an opportunity to help children refine their social skills, develop empathy and kindness and encourage their independence. The objective of this study is to decrease teacher intervention during conflicts and increase independent, child-initiated problem solving. Interventions included a short morning gathering time exclusively dedicated to SEL (social emotional learning). Other interventions during this time included an emotional check-in with visual emotional cards, consistently modeling conflict resolution strategies and introducing rules from the International Peace Foundation’s *I-Care Cat* that aim to foster the discussion of emotions and empathy towards others. Children’s literature encompassing a variety of SEL topics was also read and discussed during this time. Data was gathered through a collaborative “peaceful person” (Sonnie McFarland), an emotional knowledge comparison with a control group and teacher observations. The results show an increase in independently solved social conflicts and decrease in teacher intervention. There was also a decrease in social problems occurring in the class in general. Children’s verbal communication skill also became more sophisticated and complex. Children’s knowledge of emotions and feelings also increased post-intervention. A small-scale study such as this would benefit from more time to determine if there are large-scale and enduring effects. However, this study could be used to show that dedicating consistent time to SEL does have some immediate, positive effects on social conflict resolution and social and emotional knowledge.

*Key words: Social/emotional learning, early childhood education, Montessori, conflict resolution, independence, social problem solving, social/emotional interventions*
Conflict is a natural occurrence that children will encounter throughout their life time. At some point children need to be given and taught the skills necessary to positively resolve conflict. Most adults can solve conflict in a relatively respectful manner through compromise, negotiation, and acknowledgement of feelings but one does not give much thought to how they managed to learn these concepts. Hopefully, they were given skills as young children but adults also learned and refined their conflict resolution abilities simply through growth and experience.

However, young children do not have this experience and practice. In a preschool setting, conflict can occur and young children need to be given the proper tools and strategies to solve social peer conflict without resorting to verbal and/or physical aggressions, such as yelling, hitting or pushing. Teachers should approach conflict as teachable moments, an opportunity to help the children positively navigate tough social situations. For teachers, the faster, easier approach may be to tell the children how to solve a problem and enforce a solution that seems to work. On the outside it may appear the problem has been solved, yet, the children were never given conflict resolution skills to help them better solve conflict independently. Research has shown that children respond better to conflict when they are supported and given conflict resolution strategies they can practice and implement themselves when conflict arises.

Conflict resolution strategies along with emotional learning and support should be provided for children in a structured way to provide consistency and order. It is important to acknowledge the wide range of children’s emotions. Emotions described as negative are regarded as an opportunity to delve deeper into the discussion and understanding of the child’s emotions, as well as their peers (Heydenberk and Heydenberk, 2007). A child’s emotional
intelligence—understanding their own emotions and identifying other’s emotions—can also be a predictor in school readiness and academic success (Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, and Greenberg, 2010).

This literature review suggests that children should be provided conflict resolution strategies that they can actively practice and model. It shows that teachers should act in a supportive role rather than swiftly impose their own solutions. Furthermore, teachers should also limit their intervention in conflicts; evidence indicates that when the children are given the strategies, eventually they become more independent and sophisticated in their problem-solving abilities (Arcaro-McPhee, Doppler, and Harkins, 2002).

Benefits of Supporting Social/Emotional Learning (SEL)

Research has shown many benefits of supporting the development of social/emotional skills, one of those being school readiness. Giving children positive social skills provides indirect preparation for academic success. Study results from Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich and Greenberg (2011) determined that “…preschool emotion knowledge was a significant predictor of later academic achievement” (p. 187). This study assessed children in a preschool program that implements a universal, evidence-based, social-emotional program as part of its standard curriculum for preschool children. Children that participated for two years in this preschool program preformed academically better in first grade than children who had only participated for one year (Rhoades et al 2011). In a different study, McClelland, Tominey, and Duncan (2017) also determined that social emotional learning can have positive effects on behavior and academic achievement. In the McClelland et al they determined that a social emotional
intervention, PATHS, showed small to large effects on children’s “social emotional competence, cognitive regulation, and literacy.” (p.36)

Another benefit of SEL interventions include positive social behaviors. A study that incorporated SEL interventions as well as Mindfulness interventions discovered positive outcomes of said interventions. The Carbonneau, Atencio, Zieher, and Palacios (2018) study of three and four-year old’s, during an eight-week time period, claimed that children who were exposed to their interventions “exhibited more sustained use of kindness language and behaviors.” Carbonneau et al found that during their study “children’s language around the concept of kindness became more sophisticated and demonstrated an awareness that kindness affects both the self and the community” (Carbonneau et al, p. 297). Self-regulatory behavior, such as peer interaction and self-regulated attention, also increased on days the intervention was in place. Carbonneau et al study shows that SEL interventions can have an impact on social interaction, kindness and community building. This literature shows that supporting children’s social emotional development has benefits that are both academic and social.

Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Resolution

In Warren and Roberta Heydenberk’s article, “More than Manners: Conflict Resolution in Primary Level Classrooms,” conflict resolution strategies are addressed through a bully prevention study. Where Church et al (2018) and Arcaro-McPhee (2002) noted teacher intervention strategies for active conflict, Heydenberk and Heydenberk (2007) provided strategies that aim at prevention of conflict. They also stress the importance of emotional intelligence and how positive navigation of emotions lends to constructive conflict resolution. Heydenberk and Heydenberk’s study of 71 kindergarteners and first grade students aimed at
teaching the children specific strategies to identify and resolve conflicts. A daily check-in was utilized to encourage children to discuss their feelings and teach I-statements, (I-feel). In addition to the direct aim of the daily check-ins, which is stated above, the following indirect aim surfaced: check-ins offered opportunities for the students to develop empathy and understanding for their peers. Materson and Kersey (2013) also stress the importance of empathy, using I-statements and how it can foster positive conflict resolution. Materson and Kersey (2013) support the idea that preschoolers need to be assisted in the problem-solving procedure and be encouraged to think and notice how others are feeling.

A common theme in the research of emotional intelligence and conflict resolution is the importance of modeling for children. Materson and Kersey (2013) suggest, “[s]how them how to use I-messages and feeling words” (p. 214) and Kelley (2017) claims in her research, “modeling and mindful language were the two most salient themes” in how teachers support children’s problem solving (p. 317). A strategy that both Masterson and Kersey (2013) and Kelley (2017) propose is talking out a problem out loud. This strategy models for the children the problem, the feelings and a possible solution. Verbally modeling conflict resolution is also supported by Heydenberk and Heydenberk (2007). In their research modeling was done using a concrete object, the “conflict resolution circle.” The children took turns, each holding part of the circle, and the children solved pretend problems using the circle to take turns talking in order to come up with a solution. The circle was then placed in the classroom where it was available for children to use during real conflict. This technique of using a concrete object is similar to the Montessori peace rose that many Montessori classrooms use as a talking piece to solve problems. Kelley (2017) also offers proactive ideas to help teach about emotions to encourage positive conflict resolution when problems do arise. She states this can be done at group time with songs.
Hansen and Zambo (2007) also support the importance of emotional development and claim “…emotional development lays the foundations for both cognitive and interpersonal skills” (p. 274).

Interpersonal skills play a large role in how or if children can solve problems with peers. Hansen and Zambo suggest that teachers can support emotional learning with thoughtful children’s literature. A read-aloud at group time and a discussion afterward can encourage children to think about emotions and how they are feeling. An example book would be Wemberly Worries by Kevin Henke. There are other interventions that integrate emotional learning, McClelland et al. evaluated a program, ICPS, where lessons were given to help children to recognize their own emotions and those of others. This program saw medium gains in the children’s skill to solve interpersonal problems and noted fewer problem behaviors in the classroom. This research concludes that social emotional learning interventions can have positive effects on social emotional growth and help with behavior and conflict resolution in the classroom.

Supporting Conflict Resolution

According to Church, Mashford-Scott, and Cohrsse (2018), conflict in childhood and early childhood education settings is normal and should be an opportunity to help children develop their social skills. Arcaro-McPhee, Doppler, and Harkins (2002) also support the notion that teachers should utilize conflict to support children in becoming more independent problem solvers. Both Church et al. (2018) and Arcaro-McPhee et al. (2002) have concluded that teachers should act as mediators during an interpersonal conflict. Church et al. (2018) examined two approaches to conflict resolution where a teacher imposes a solution, or the teacher supports the
child’s problem. It was determined that supporting problem solving by staying with the children throughout the conflict resolution process is key for the children to follow through with solving the problem. Church et al. (2018) describe how “collaborative compromise” occurs when the teacher stays with the children to offer advice on what the children determined had been the problem and then solutions were developed. In the narrative where a teacher simply offered a solution, Church et al. (2018) determined that the children continued to argue over the possessions and the imposed teacher solution was neither implemented nor followed through on. As a result, the children are not developing positive problem-solving skills. Therefore, in the imposing a solution model, the problem never actually gets solved.

In the supportive model, some language the teacher uses includes phrases such as, “What do you think you could do now?,” “You need to tell him and use your words” and “Let’s have a conversation.” This language in a supportive narrative gives the children the opportunity to be active participants in the problem solving. Church et al. (2018) successfully provided data on why a teacher should support problem solving vs. providing their own solutions. Arcaro-McPhee et al. (2002) also suggests that teachers should help define the problem and help brainstorm possible solutions. Arcaro-McPhee et al. (2002) go one step further in suggesting that both sides of the conflict are acknowledged, recognizing both perspectives help the children come up with their own solutions. The authors also provide a consistent conflict-resolution model for the child in their study. Having this consistent model described as “peer problem solving” allowed the child to refer to that model when engaged in conflict.

Church et al. (2018) and Arcaro-McPhee (2002) do not provide the answer as to how children can be supported prior to conflict occurring or how children can be encouraged to become more independent in conflict resolution. In the narrative provided, the teacher says, “Use
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"...your words,” but how can the children be prompted to use their word immediately and independently, rather than always needing the teacher to intervene? This is precisely where teachers can implement SEL interventions and conflict resolution interventions in the classroom as preventative methods. However, there are many programs and ways to accomplish this. How does a teacher determine what is best for their classroom.

How the Montessori Method Supports SEL and Conflict Resolution

In many ways the Montessori Method of education naturally supports SEL and conflict resolution. The Montessori environment is a positive environment that allows for self-discipline and where children are encouraged to be independent. The mixed-age classroom facilitates community building and respect among peers. Maria Montessori’s writings and discoveries about child development point to the many benefits the children experience in a Montessori classroom. Dereli, Danişman, and Demircan (2017) states that many characteristics of the Montessori method encourage social growth including independence, freedom within limits, self-discipline, self-confidence and respect for other children. Dereli et al. also claim that the Montessori Method positively affects social aspects like cooperation, social interactions, social skills and social emotional skills. Using a personal information form, a Montessori Method assessment parent interview form, a social competence and behavior evaluation teacher and parent form scale, and an emotional regulation checklist (teacher form) Dereli et al. concluded that the Montessori Method has positive effects on children’s (ages four and five) social competency and behavior. The study claims that because children can take ownership of their own behavior, they can take responsibility and explore different social roles in a supportive and caring environment. Children can share their ideas with their peers without the interference of a
teacher. Dereli et al. also discovered that emotional regulation skills were positively affected in this study. They additionally recognized the role of freedom in the classroom; encouraging children to explore their environment and make mistakes without harsh judgement, and take the opportunity to learn from mistakes.

Although Dereli et al. conducted their study in a Montessori environment it would be beneficial to see if there are other SEL interventions that correlate with the Montessori Method to enhance what the Montessori Method already provides within the context of SEL. Montessori herself spoke of the importance of community and social interactions; Montessori (1967 p. 225) wrote, “But what is social life if not the solving of social problems, behaving properly and pursuing aims acceptable to all?” Similar to the findings of the study mentioned above, Standing (1998) also concludes that aspects of the Montessori Method such as- self-discipline and freedom within limits can contribute to a positive social experience and a sense of community. Standing also states, “[t]hey began to exhibit an extraordinary self-discipline; and with it a serenity of spirit, and a great respect for the rights of other” (1998 p. 50). In a Montessori classroom there is an emphasis on what Montessori calls “Grace and Courtesy”. The children participate in lessons and activities that promote and teach respect of the environment and of their peers. Creating community through a mixed-age group, Grace and Courtesy and the encouragement of self-discipline and independence are all important elements that support SEL in the Montessori environment. “They come to feel part of a group to which their activity contributes. And not only do they begin to take an interest in this, but they work profoundly, as one may say, in their hearts” (Montessori, 1964, p. 232).
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Conclusion of Literature Review

The literature reviewed suggests that social/emotional interventions are important and necessary in developing children’s social skills, including constructive social conflict resolution. Some suggestions included modeling verbal skills, introducing emotional knowledge, using concrete materials and children’s literature. Not only do interventions boost social skills and emotional knowledge, interventions have been shown to prepare children for school and predict later success.
Research question:
Does implementing a consistent group time dedicated to social/emotional learning improve children’s ability to independently problem-solve interpersonal conflict with their peers?

Subsidiary questions:
How does the Montessori method support children’s social/emotional learning?
With this extra support do the children solve conflict independently with strategies such as negotiation and/or compromise?
With consistent time to focus on social/emotional learning do the children have less interpersonal conflict with peers?

Purpose
Research in the field of social emotional development is extensive and touches on many positive aspects of a child’s development such as school readiness, positive social behaviors and sense of community. To narrow down some of the positive effects social emotional interventions can have on children’s social skills, the focus of the current study is to determine how children can be encouraged to participate in independent conflict resolution. Attaining conflict resolution skills is surely an important goal for the developing child. The research reviewed suggests that modeling and encouraging purposeful language are the most effective strategies for supporting positive conflict resolution. Several other techniques reviewed also suggest the use of concrete materials.

A Montessori classroom already includes ways for children to build positive conflict resolution skills, like the use of a peace rose, Grace and Courtesy lessons and the encouragement of freedom and independence. However, even with these aspects expertly implemented, I felt that our classroom still struggled with independent social conflict resolution. Most of the children in the classroom resorted to negative strategies in order to solve their problems such as verbal and physical aggression as well as ignoring the problem and letting it go unsolved. The unsolved problems resulted in recurrent problems that never seemed to go away. The children
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were also constantly seeking teacher intervention and were unable to efficiently communicate their issues and feelings toward each other. Could there be a way to encourage independent problem solving through a focused time dedicated to SEL and modeling conflict resolution skills on a consistent basis? In a Montessori classroom concepts are often introduced from concrete to abstract and teachers introduce desired rules and behaviors through modeling. Social/emotional interventions done in this similar manner may enhance and support certain aspects of the Montessori method and encourage children to independently solve social conflicts. It would be valuable to determine if children in a Montessori classroom would benefit from similar interventions mentioned above such as modeling conflict resolution, and using literature and concrete representations of conflict resolution skills. The goal of my action research was to provide the children with the tools and strategies to independently resolve social conflict.

Method

Location and participants

Participating in this study are 21 children ages three to six years old in a classroom at a private Montessori preschool. There are nine girls and twelve boys in the class as well as one lead teacher and one assistant teacher. Permission slips were sent to parents to inform them of this study and the risks involved (see Appendix A for example letter). The daily schedule was adjusted slightly to allow for a morning gathering time, while still allowing for a work cycle of over two hours.

Methodology

Both small-scale qualitative and quantitative data was collected, during an action research study to determine, if through a morning gathering time dedicated to SEL, the children’s ability
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to independently engage in positive conflict resolution with peers would increase. The gathering time included an emotional check-in of each child, a variety of SEL literature, discussion following these read alouds, modeling and discussing potential conflict scenarios, and finally, the introduction of “I-care” rules from the National Peace Foundation using the I-Care Cat.

Quantitative data was obtained by recording the number of problems that occurred in the classroom pre and post-intervention. The problems were charted according to what types of problems occurred, which children were involved, strategies used and if the problem was independently solved or not (See Appendix B for sample chart). The whole class also participated, pre and post-intervention, in creating what I called a Peaceful Person. This was modeled after Sonnie Mcfarland’s Love Light lesson from her book “Honoring the Child.” (2004). The children were asked, un-prompted, about how to solve problems and ways to show kindness and respect. They were also asked about feelings and emotions, and any feelings they mentioned were written on the peaceful person. The children then signed the peaceful person to signify that they agreed with the words or statements written on the peaceful person. This activity was done at the end of the intervention as well to note any differences. Qualitative data was gathered through observations and interpretations of social conflict.

Figure 1: Signing the Peaceful Person
Tables 1 and 2 shown below are the pre-implementation and post-implementation schedules. After five weeks of implementation we returned to our pre-implementation schedule and post-data collection began for two weeks.

Table 1
**Pre-implementation schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:15-8:30</td>
<td>Drop-off time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:15-11:00</td>
<td>Work cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00-11:30</td>
<td>Group time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-12:15</td>
<td>Outdoor time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pick up time for ½ day students or transition to afternoon program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
**Implementation schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:15-8:30</td>
<td>Drop-off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30/8:45-9:00</td>
<td>Morning group time (SEL interventions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00-11:15</td>
<td>Work time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15-11:30</td>
<td>Group time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-12:15</td>
<td>Outdoor time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pick up time for ½ day students or transition to afternoon program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Procedure

Pre-implementation Data Collection

For two weeks I recorded the number of problems and strategies the children applied. From the two weeks of pre-implementation data, it was calculated that the classroom had, on average, 43 problems a week. The strategies used and reasons for the conflict were noted, below are the skills and reasons observed. Dialogue was also recorded; example narratives are included. Verbal aggression and seeking the teacher were the most-used strategies during the pre-implementation period of two weeks. The following presents this data that was gathered by using the chart in Appendix B.

Pre-intervention strategies:
1. Verbal aggression (yelling, screaming)
2. Physical aggression (hitting, pushing, biting, etc)
3. Negotiation/Compromise
4. Ignore problem
5. Seek the teacher

Type or reason for conflict:
1. Teasing/unkindness
2. Breaking an established classroom rule or practice [tattletale] (budding in line, saying potty words, not using a work accoding to the lesson demonstration, not using a placemat for art, having too many snacks, not cleaning up work, etc)
3. Fighting/struggling over materials/supplies
4. Differing perspectives/ideas while collaborating

Pre-implementation Observation and Dialogue Examples

(names have been changed)

-Sam takes basket for sun/month work, places it on top of sun. Harry yells, “Don’t do that!”

-Will observing John’s work, talking. John yells, “Go away!” Will comes to teacher, “I didn’t like it when he said ‘go away’” Teacher says, “did you tell him that?” Will goes back to John and tells him, “I don’t like that.”

-(Patrick) “I was in front of Sarah, noooo! (crying)”

-Child using “river walk” work. “Its with your shoes off!” Mary yells at another child.
- “You can watch but you have to watch quietly. This is not a two person work.” (Nikki)
- (Barry) Child standing near snack table (observing/talking), another child (Elliot) grabs his face. Teacher intervenes, child who grabbed/scratched says he wanted space.

Because this study is focused on positive problem-solving the reason for the problem is of less importance; nonetheless, it was also presented. Rather, the focus of this study is giving the children the skills and tools needed to solve the conflict on their own. The rationale for this is that conflict is inevitable, there will be many reasons for conflict, each one unique. Instead of trying to address every problem it was critical to give children skills they can use during a variety of conflict.

Figure 2: Conflict Resolution Strategies
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Implementation

Morning gathering time schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Emotional check-in</td>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Emotional check-in</td>
<td>Silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional check-in</td>
<td>Modeling problem</td>
<td>Emotional check-in</td>
<td>Modeling problem</td>
<td>Emotional check-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book</td>
<td>I-Care Cat</td>
<td>Book</td>
<td>Book</td>
<td>I-Care Cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural discussion</td>
<td>Natural discussion</td>
<td>Natural discussion</td>
<td>Natural discussion</td>
<td>Natural discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3: Morning gathering time schedule*

The Montessori Method

The Montessori Method is naturally set up to allow children to practice and develop their social/emotional skills. Some aspects that should be taken into account for this study are strategies and activities that the children have already been introduced to that support SEL and conflict resolution. The peace lesson that uses the peace rose is one way that we model to the children about how to resolve conflict. The peace rose was introduced to the class earlier in the year and in previous years, the children are familiar with this conflict resolution strategy. This study hopes to build on this process and encourage thoughtful discussion. The children were allowed to use the peace rose as they liked but it was not introduced again or used in this study. Grace and Courtesy lessons such as the interrupting lesson, walking around a rug lesson and observing a work lesson are also integral to the Montessori method which encourages a sense of community and respect among the children. Given this information, it would suggest that Grace and Courtesy lessons should increase positive interactions among peers. This group of children had been exposed to a variety of Grace and Courtesy lessons throughout the school year and returning children have
also been exposed in previous years. This study did not document or analyze any additional Grace and Courtesy lessons given.

Implementation Strategies

**Collaborative Peaceful Person**

The children had previously been introduced to Sonnie McFarland’s Peaceful Person and Love Lights lesson. During our first morning group time the teacher presented a large, life size cut-out “person” similar to our smaller peaceful person that sits on the peace table. I asked the children if they could express how kindness can be shown and strategies they use to solve problems. The children were asked if they could think of any feelings and I wrote those down on our Peaceful Person. I made no suggestions, nor were the children prompted in any way, another Peaceful Person was made at the end of the action research and any differences were recorded.

*Figure 4: Peace table with peaceful person and love lights.*
**Emotional check-in’s**

At the beginning of each morning group time we had an emotional check-in with each child. Emotion cards were gradually introduced that depicted real children with different facial expressions reflective of various feelings or emotions. Feelings such as happy, sad, angry, proud, excited, surprised, angry, shy, sick, frustrated, worried and lonely were all introduced. The children also offered up their own ideas of what the face might be depicting. Children were encouraged to use an I-statement when saying how they were feeling. At first, I observed that children often said they felt “good” or “bad.” As more emotion cards were introduced and as more discussions were had, the children’s answers became more sophisticated.

It was also discussed that you can feel more than one feeling or emotion at a time. After the introduction of this concept, the children often shared how they were feeling ‘tired AND happy’ or ‘sad AND proud’. For the emotional check-in I used the basket of emotion cards from which I choose a picture of the emotion each child stated and showed it to the children. These cards were kept out until the end of the check-in session to demonstrate how many different feelings the group could experience.
As the gathering time progressed, it was observed that the children really enjoyed the emotional check-in and liked telling the group why they were feeling a certain way. This activity also helped with building community in the classroom; the children began to understand that their peers have feelings too. The check-in was a time where we discussed “good” and “bad” emotions and that all emotions are valid. Sometimes, a child might feel sad or angry and that is okay, we want to recognize and validate a wide range of feelings as well so that the children can learn how to express themselves in a positive way. After each morning gathering time the emotion cards were placed on the oral language shelf and the children were able to freely explore the different cards.

![Figure 6: Exploring emotional cards](image)

**Introducing SEL literature**

At the end of each morning gathering time, I read a book that was related to SEL. Examples of themes of the books follow. Reading a wide variety of books was important to the study and I observed that the story was the children’s favorite part of gathering time. Introducing this was an integral part of this action research. The children responded well to the different stories and there was often long conversation after the read-aloud related to the topic. Children are naturally drawn to stories and books therefore incorporating SEL into a read aloud facilitated conversations around these ideas. The children were often eager to share either their own stories
or about a time when they identified with the feeling of character in the book. I was also able to ask open-ended questions to the children to elicit conversation and more abstract thinking using a tangible resource such as a book. I observed that this part of the intervention allowed the children to not only think about their feelings but, also those of others. After each book was read, it was placed in a book basket available for the children to read for the duration of the study.

Figure 7: Exploring SEL literature

Book themes:

- Feelings modeled in both fiction and non-fiction stories
- Conflicts modeled in non-fiction stories
- Self-control/self-discipline books
- Montessori books on “peace”
- Books modeling and discussing kindness
- Book on using “words”

Example of books read:

*There are no Animals in this Book (only feelings)* by Chani Sanchez

*Words to Love* by Rick Warren

*Spoon* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal
The third component of my procedure included using a concrete object, following the suggestion in the study of Heydenberk and Heydenberk (2007).

**Figure 8: I-Care Cat**

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*Be Kind* by Pat Zietlow Miller

*The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr

*The Way I Act* by Steve Metzger

*On Monday When it Rained* by Cherryle Kachenmeister

*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst

*Lots of Feelings* by Shelley Rotner

*Seeds and Trees* by Brandon Walden

*In My Heart* by Jo Witek

*The Color Monster* by Anna Llenas

*Wemberly Worried* by Kevin Henkes

*I Can Handle it!* by Laurie Wright

*Our Peaceful Classroom* by Aline D. Wolf
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There are three rules associated with I-Care Cat:

- Hands are for helping (not hurting)
- We use I-Care language
- We listen to each other

The classroom discussed I-Care rules from the National Peace Foundation. These rules aligned well with the Montessori philosophy and with the aim of the study. I-Care rules were discussed twice a week during our morning gathering time. These rules were introduced with the “I-Care at,” a small hand puppet. The rules were then reviewed, and songs were sung about the rules that were provided. These rules also facilitated conversation about how to interact with their peers on a daily basis. There were also songs that discussed responsibility, kindness, peace and respect.

Figure 9: Introducing I-Care rules

In addition to the emotional check-ins, SEL literature and I-Care Cat I also implemented modeling conflict as a means to change behavior. This was also a suggested as an effective tool
used in Heydenberk and Heydenberk (2007). Materson and Kersey also recommended modeling conflict with children and emphasized the importance of using I-statements and feeling words. The use of the I-Care rules also fit well with how conflict was modeled, *we use I-Care language* and *we listen to each other* were strategies the children could implement. These were all aspects I incorporated when modeling conflict during gathering time.

**Modeling conflict resolution**

Conflict was modeled daily by myself with help from the assistant teacher. Conflict that was modeled was based on what I observed during the pre-implementation data collection phase. The conflict was loosely modeled using aspects of the Montessori Peace rose model for consistency. As mentioned previously, the children had already been introduced to this common Montessori conflict resolution strategy earlier in the school year. The peace rose model is a wonderful, tangible tool the children can use as a talking piece. It was not used during the study to model conflict because I wanted to introduce a different approach. I also wanted to encourage children to solve conflict *independently, in the moment and verbally*. Retrieving the peace rose, for some conflict, seemed like an unnecessary distraction and transition for some children, thus the rationale for my action research.

To start the role-modeling process my assistant and I stood in front of the group of children. I explained the problem to the children and then modeled it with my assistant. Each person had uninterrupted time to state their feelings and their perspective. Sample solutions were given in the form of negotiation or compromise. Sample narratives for the teacher led modeling is included. Examples of different problems modeled are also included.
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Sample one:

Teacher one: “I didn’t like it when you took that work, I was going to use it. I am feeling sad”
Teacher two: “But I wanted to use first, I feel sad too”
Teacher one: “Can I use it first and then when I am done I will let you know?”
Teacher two: “Okay, please let me know when you are done”

Sample two:

Teacher one: “Excuse me, you pushed me in line. That hurt my body, I feel sad.”
Teacher two: “I’m sorry, I really want to wash my hands for snack.”
Teacher one: “I understand, but could you please wait next time behind me and not push?”
Teacher two: “Yes, I will be more careful with my body next time, can I help you feel better, do you need an ice pack or a hug?”
Teacher one: “A hug would make me feel better.”

Sample three:

Teacher one: “I think the this piece goes here in the puzzle.”
Teacher two: (grabs piece out of hand) “No, it goes here.”
Teacher one: “Can I please have that piece back, I didn’t like it when you took it from me without asking.”
Teacher two: “But it goes here, not there. I didn’t like when you didn’t listen to my words that it goes here. That made me feel frustrated”
Teacher one: “I’m sorry you feel frustrated, I will listen next time. Can we try it in this spot first and then in your spot?”
Teacher two: “Ok, that sounds like a good idea.”

After my assistant and I modeled conflict resolution for the children, the children were invited to model conflict in the same style. During this role playing I supported the children and helped with solutions and phrases to use. The hope was that practicing and supporting the children in this controlled environment would give them the skills and tools to independently solve real social conflict.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teasing/Unkindness</th>
<th>Rule breaking</th>
<th>Struggle over materials</th>
<th>Different perspectives/ideas while collaborating</th>
<th>Bothering or disrupting friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t like your picture, it’s ugly”</td>
<td>“Hey, you budged in line”</td>
<td>“I had it [book] first”</td>
<td>“No, I want to put it here” EX: Brown stair pink tower collaboration</td>
<td>[yelling to tell a friend to stop touching work]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If you don’t play with me I am never going to be your friend”</td>
<td>“Teacher, Henry moved on the line”</td>
<td>“This is my work”</td>
<td>“I am the mom you can be the sister” [playing house]</td>
<td>[friend that is loud]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I am going to use it [the work] until group time”</td>
<td>“Teacher, he said poop”</td>
<td>“I wanted to do it next”</td>
<td>“This is a house” “No it’s a car”</td>
<td>[touching/hugging without consent]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You can’t play with us”</td>
<td>“He’s running”</td>
<td>“I wanted snack next”</td>
<td>“No, we don’t play the game like this”</td>
<td>[accidental hurting]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10: Problems modeled
Figure 11: Modeling conflict
Results and Data Analysis

Prior to beginning my study I charted number of problems that occurred in the classroom. I also recorded narratives and noted strategies the children used and reasons for problems. I then implemented the four components outlined above- emotional check-ins, SEL literature, I-Care Cat and role-modeling of conflicts and verbal solutions for five weeks straight. Following this implementation, I collected post-data for two weeks through a second Peaceful Person activity, an emotional and feelings knowledge comparison with a control group and finally, use of the qualitative chart, a second time, to record number of problems, transcribe narratives, reasonings and strategies used to solve conflict.

Peaceful Person

When doing the first Peaceful Person the children had limited vocabulary surrounding the ideas of kindness, respect and feelings. Many children expressed negative actions or described what you should not do in order to show kindness, respect and how to resolve conflict. The children also used non-descriptive language or general ideas rather that specific examples.

During the final day of the intervention another Peaceful Person was made with the children. The responses were much more descriptive and sophisticated than the previous Peaceful Person. They also named more positive actions rather than negative ones. The children were also able to name several more emotions/feelings post-intervention.

Pre-intervention feelings/emotions: Anger, sad, tired, happy, frustrated, mad, disappointed, scared and shy.
Post-intervention feelings/emotions: Excited, silly, lonely, thoughtful, tired, happy, love, grumpy, scared, shy, sad, hurt, exuberant, disappointed, mad, surprised, worried, frustrated, cranky, proud, confused, amazed, sick, exhausted, upset, and joyful.

Examples of language used, and ideas expressed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peaceful person (pre-intervention)</th>
<th>Peaceful person (post-intervention)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t hit or push</td>
<td>Say “sorry”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t be mean</td>
<td>Help clean up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No yelling</td>
<td>“I like that work you’re doing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>“I love you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring about each other</td>
<td>Say “thank you” and “please”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being helpful</td>
<td>Help get a dog across the street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk to each other</td>
<td>Get ready for school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be respectful</td>
<td>Reaching a toy for your brother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 12: Peaceful person examples*
Social Conflict Resolution

Figure 13: Peaceful person: pre-intervention

Figure 14: Peaceful person: post-implementation
Emotional and Feelings Knowledge Comparison

A control group of fourteen children, ages three-five, from another Children’s House classroom in the same school was used to compare knowledge of feelings and emotions of children who had been exposed to the five week intervention. The children from each group were shown a variety of pictures of children expressing different emotions. They were asked what they thought the children were feeling. Sample chart of compared answers is included.

After analyzing this data it was clear that the group exposed to the intervention had more complex and varied answers. One difference was that several children in the control group were unsure of how to answer when shown a picture. In that case, they were not pressured to give an answer and *unsure* was noted. Children in the control group also answered with the broad terms of “mad” or “happy”. An aim of this study was to show the children that emotions are not binary and there are more options than feeling “good” or “bad.” There are more specific ways to express ones feelings to better communicate when resolving conflict. Some of the varied feelings that the study group children expressed included: frustrated, nervous, silly, proud and confused. The study group also gave more consistent answers to the same picture. Consistent answers to the same picture is instrumental because if all the children in the classroom are consistent as far as recognizing and identifying certain feelings they will be more aware of their feelings and those of others. Being more mindful of their feelings and those of others contributed to more thoughtful and positive conflict resolution.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture number</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Study Group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Study group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Study group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Study group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Funny</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Laughing</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Silly</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Sleepy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Yelling</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Scared</td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Dizzy</td>
<td>Proud</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Proud</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Proud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Disappointed</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Frustrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>Cranky</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Mad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Sleepy</td>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Sleepy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>Funny</td>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Excited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>Afraid</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Mad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Mad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 15: Individual comparison chart of control and study children*
After review of the comparison chart and graph above, it is shown that the study group had better knowledge and more sophisticated vocabulary regarding emotions and feelings. During this study, I saw that the children would randomly tell me or a peer how they were feeling. I also observed children reading books and asking questions about characters emotional well being, “I wonder how she is feeling?” As a result of this study the children are more cognizant of their emotions and those of others, they are also comfortable in expressing and communicating those emotions.

**Social Conflict Analysis: Post-Implementation**

Overall, the children’s abilities to solve conflict in a positive manner increased. One of the most notable difference was the amount of social problems that occurred post-implementation. There was a significance decrease in the average problems per week during the post-implementation data collection time. When conflict did occur many of the children were observed positively engaged in the process and did not immediately seek teacher intervention.
Social Conflict Resolution

Pre-intervention, the class averaged 8.6 social problems daily. There was a significant decrease, more than half, during post-implementation data collection, averaging only four problems daily. Also noted in figure 17, the children’s ability to solve problems with positive behavior like negotiation and compromise increased while verbal aggression and seeking a teacher decrease from the two weeks of pre-data collection (see figure 16). Sample narratives are also provided (names have been changed).

Child one: “I didn’t like it when you ignored me, it made me feel mad”
Child two: “I want space”
Child one: “Ok, but please don’t ignore me”
Child two: “Ok, I will play with you outside”

Child one: “Don’t step on me, I don’t like it”
Child two: “Do you want a hug?”

Child one: “Please don’t touch my work”
Child two: “Sorry Sam” [walks away]

Child one: “Sam, give those back, they’ll rip” (child took directions to a game).
Child two: “Sam, please give it back, you weren’t playing the game”
Child three: (Sam): [gave directions back]

Child one: “Please stop talking, it is bothering me. I’m frustrated”
Child two: “Sorry, I wanted to look at your work.”
Child one: “Ok, can you watch quietly?”
Child two: “OK”

Child one: “I want to be the sister.”
Child two: “Guys, this is Jamie’s work, she gets to decide who is the sister.”
Child three: “Sarah you can be the sister this time. Liz, you can be the sister next time, do you want to be the baby?”
Child one: “Yes, I’ll be the baby!”
Limitations and Conclusion of Results

It would be beneficial to continue the study for an extended period of time in our classroom and other Montessori preschool environments. Limitations and results may vary according to different teaching styles and exactness of implementation. Another limitation is that
Social Conflict Resolution

it would be difficult to separate the social/emotional aspects that are inherent to the Montessori Method from new interventions introduced.

Overall, I feel like my goals for this action research were accomplished. I found myself being interrupted less to help facilitate conflict resolution and the children seemed more comfortable in their abilities to solve conflict independently. I would like to continue to see the children engage in back and forth conversation during conflict and use I-statements. I observed that many of the four-year old’s and five-year old’s were able to independently model positive problem solving. These children also were observed being kind and compassionate with their peers. There was also less social conflict occurring in the classroom, which required less conflict resolution and teacher intervention. The children’s communication and verbal skills also improved and their SEL vocabulary increased.

I did notice smaller gains with some of the younger three-year old’s in the class, there could be a variety of reasons for this. One reason could simply be their maturation and understanding of social roles. Many of the three-year old’s still have yet to develop strong friendships and may have had a difficult time connecting with the ideas of kindness and community. Even though, in the short time, the intervention may not have an immediate effect like seen in some of the older children it was critical that these younger children observed the behavior and modeling of the older children. They are learning the verbal cues and phases used to solve conflict and hearing new vocabulary related to SEL. In a mixed age classroom, the younger children will observe constructive problem solving and kindness being exhibited throughout the classroom. Continuing to support the younger children through SEL interventions and the maturing of age will help develop their sense of community, kindness and support their ability to independently resolve conflict.
Further Action

I would like to continue this action research for the next school year. I believe that starting the beginning of the year with this type of intervention may enhance the longevity of the desired goals. Once all aspects of the intervention are introduced it will be important to continue to introduce literature, revisit the I-Care rules, use the emotional check-ins and occasionally model conflict. Similar to Grace and Courtesy, I would like to continue these SEL interventions to ensure these practices become a natural part of the classroom. Children can implement these tools and strategies throughout their early childhood education and beyond.

Reinforcing ideas like kindness and peace will ensure that these concepts become embeadded into our classroom culture. For this reason, I would like to build on the Montessori Peace curriculum in order to enhance the sense of community and respect in the classroom. I would like to incorporate more *peacebuilding* exercises as a preemptive measure to conflict occuring. I hope to incorporate more peace activities that include peace journals. The Montessori Method focuses on the education of the senses, I image discussing, then writing down in the peace journals what peace feels, looks, sounds, smells and tastes like; they could also include pictures. I also want to encourage the children to be Montessori *peacemaker* and *peacekeepers*. Peacemakers take an active role in conflict resolution in order to return to a peaceful state. As peacekeepers, the children will participate in the peaceful environment and abide by respectful guidelines created by them (Janke, 2019). This is where I will continue to use a large peaceful person and each year, as a class, we can discuss and agree upon peaceful guidelines for our class that we all will follow. Creating these guidelines together will give children ownership of their environment and their interactions with peers.
As mentioned, I plan on following through with many aspects of the morning gathering time. I will continue with the emotion check-in; I observed the children especially enjoyed sharing their feelings with the group. The concrete materials, like the emotion cards and I-Care Cat, are something that the children are able to connect with easily. I will continue to refer to the I-Care rules and I-Care Cat during gathering time.

In addition to the interventions implemented in this study I would like to include additional visuals and hands on materials. In the classroom I have a board with all of our children’s names and pictures. They are able to remove their names/pictures for a variety of reasons such as, saving a space for snack or spelling practice. I will make the board larger to include a space for a feeling picture. The children will be able to change the card depending on how they are feeling that day; this is another great visual they can use to express themselves. I would also like to use pictures for social stories and sequencing cards that can be used in the early language area. In the art area I plan on encourage picture stories and the use of emotion stencils for drawing.

After reading Carbonneau (2018) et al research on SEL interventions and the incorporation of mindfulness-based interventions, I would like to include more mindful-based activities. The Montessori Method inherently incorporates mindful practices in the curriculum. Activities such as silence, yoga and intentional breathing are all practices I use in the classroom. As I continue this action plan, I hope to include these activities in a more deliberate way and introduce new activities such as meditation.

**Implications for Further Research**

It would be advised to continue social/emotional research in the field of Montessori. Research in the Montessori classroom in regards to social conflict resolution would be valuable
Social Conflict Resolution

information for the education community. In today's fast-paced environment with a strong emphasis on academics, focusing on social problem solving and growing the child’s repertoire of social skills and tools would be beneficial to do at a young age.

Conclusion and Reflection

Supporting children’s social/emotional growth at a young age has several benefits. There is excess pressure on parents and educators to push children’s academic knowledge. This extreme focus on academics leaves little room for SEL. However, it’s been shown that supporting children’s social/emotional development, can indirectly prepare them for academic success as well as provide them with important social skills such as the ability to positively resolve conflict. The Montessori Method teaches academics but it also provides children with strong SEL skills. I learned that conflict is inevitable and children do not yet have the practice and experience to constructively solve social conflict independently. It is the teacher’s job to support children in their development of conflict resolution strategies. One way to do this is through thoughtful SEL interventions used in this study.

An unexpected and positive outcome of this study was the language acquisition displayed by the children. Their social/emotional vocabulary increased and, verbally, the children became more sophisticated in their conflict resolution dialogue. This was demonstrated in the final collection of data shown in Figure 17, where negotiation and compromise increased exponentially from 13 percent to 43 percent. It was also especially evident in the final peaceful person data presented in Figure 12. The children’s thinking adjusted when we created our second peaceful person and their responses included actual phrases they may use and specific, detailed examples of ways to be kind and solve conflict.
Social Conflict Resolution

The Montessori environment is a carefully prepared, safe place for children to practice verbally expressing themselves in order to increase their ability to independently problem solve. I believe that I provided this type of environment for the children during this study and will continue to facilitate SEL in our classroom.
References


Janke, R. (2019, May 6). Email interview.


Dear Parents,

As many of you know I am in my final year in the Montessori Education graduate program at the University of Wisconsin: River Falls. For my master’s degree in Montessori Education I am required to complete an action research project in our classroom. I am planning on dedicating a morning group time to social/emotional learning and conflict resolution skills. I hope to study the effect on the children's social/emotional development, specifically looking into the children's ability to recognize feelings and increase independent, interpersonal conflict resolution, and decrease teacher intervention.

Research has shown the benefits of social/emotional interventions in young children and the positive effects it has on aspects like school readiness and effective social skills including mature conflict resolution skills like negotiation and compromise. I plan to dedicate consistent time during class to further encourage positive development of the children’s social learning. This will be done through children’s literature, hands on activities and discussing our “I-care” rules as well as modeling conflict resolution skills children can apply to real interpersonal conflict. My hypothesis is that this consistent time for social/emotional learning and introduction of conflict resolution skills will support the children in their social/emotional development and, in turn, help them become independent problem solvers with the ability to communicate and recognize their feelings and those of others.

During the course of this study, please be assured that students won’t be asked to do anything they wouldn't normally do as part of the regular classroom activities, and that risks of participation are not greater than what might be expected during a typical school day.

My initial plan to gather preliminary data would be through discussions with your child and written observations of conflicts. While implementing this action plan I will be using scientific observation; noting numbers of conflicts, code the language the children are using and observe if problems were solved with or without teacher intervention. I will also conduct a final interview/survey with you child. Pseudonyms will be used for the children to ensure confidentiality and this information will be presented in an educational setting once finished.

Data collection will be confidential, and participation is voluntary but also much appreciated as I continue to learn about the Montessori method and how best to encourage the children through Maria Montessori's philosophy. You may also withdraw you child at any time during the study.
Social Conflict Resolution

All students will be participating in the activities as part of their regular classroom day, but data will not be used in this study unless I have parent consent. Research findings regarding your child will be shared with parents/guardians upon request.

Agreeing to participate simply means that you allow the confidential use of your child’s data. If you have any questions about the research procedure, please contact Diane Bennett, Ph.D. Director of Grants and Research University of Wisconsin – River Falls
diane.bennett@uwrf.edu
715-425-3195
And/or Professors Kateri Carver at kateri.carver@uwrf.edu 715-425-3256 and Melina Papadimitriou, melina.papa@uwrf.edu 715-220-2466

Please sign the permission slip below and return as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Alison Eng

☐ I give permission
☐ I do not give permission

for my child _______________________________________ to participant in the action research project stated above during the Spring 2019 semester.

Parents name (Printed):_________________________        Date: _________________________
Parent's signature: _____________________________
## Appendix B

### Qualitative Data Collection Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Skill/Strategies used</th>
<th>Type/reason for problem</th>
<th>Teacher intervention</th>
<th>Independently solved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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