

Assessing Alignment Between Mission, Activities, and Achievements: A Stakeholder Analysis at a Reggio-Inspired Preschool



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One of the key tenets of the Reggio Emilia approach is that learning is social. Though the Reggio founder, Loris Malaguzzi, established schools focused on educating young children in Italy, my experience in this program has shown me that this holds true for adult learners as well. My growth as a learner, leader, writer, teacher, and person over the last three years is shaped entirely by the people who surrounded me, both physically and virtually.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Due to the accelerated growth of a newly launched private, Reggio-inspired preschool, the administrator of the school had not found an opportunity to conduct a formal assessment of the school's alignment between its mission, activities, and growth. As a result, the preschool stakeholders had not received any feedback related to how the school was effectively performing and delivering on its promises as a Reggio-inspired preschool. Accordingly, this capstone project examined the perspectives of parents, teachers, and the administrator at the preschool to determine if the preschool's mission and practices were aligned and to identify any gaps between mission and practice that needed improvement. The results from the project will be used to inform the administrator about the effectiveness of the school and opportunities to improve.

Research Questions

The research questions for this capstone project were guided by Volkwein's (2003) framework for Institutional Effectiveness through Governance and Administration (IEGA). The IEGA framework utilizes four conceptual domain inquiries: "what you say" (mission statement and purpose), "what you do" (institutional functions and activities), "what you achieve" (assessments and outcomes), and "what needs to be improved" (opportunities for change and renewal). Based on these four domains, the following research questions were developed:

1. *What the school says:* What are stakeholders' understandings of the purpose, goals, objectives, plans, and aspirations of the school?
2. *What the school does:* Do stakeholders feel that the activities and practices their child engages in at school facilitate their child's growth? How do stakeholders contribute to these?
3. *What the school achieves:* How do stakeholders know that goals and objectives are being achieved? What are the roles of the stakeholders in assessing the achievement of those goals and objectives?
4. *What the school needs to improve:* What do stakeholders believe should be improved to better meet the school's purpose, goals, objectives, plans, and aspirations?

Considering the highly participatory approach of the constructivist Reggio Emilia philosophy, the stakeholders of the school within the context of this study include the teachers, administrative director, and the parents. Appropriately, a mixed-methods research design was identified as the best approach to explore the stakeholder perspectives within the IEGA framework. The stakeholders were at the forefront when designing the research questions that aligned with the four conceptual domains of the IEGA framework inquiries. This emphasis was important to ensure that the project findings provided an in-depth explanation of all the stakeholder perspectives, since they

are the ones who are collaboratively charged with making the small, private, Reggio-inspired preschool a true reflection of its inclusive participatory philosophy.

Project Design


To address the research questions, an exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis was integrated. Interview data were collected from two lead teachers, the administrative director, and ten parents to explore and understand the major understandings and perceptions among these stakeholders. Then, after conducting an axial coding thematic analysis on the transcripts, a closed-and-open-ended survey was developed and distributed to all of the preschool's parents. The survey included a variety of different question types, including Likert scales, ordinal rankings, and sliding scales. In addition, the survey instrument provided the parents with an opportunity to include any mentions not previously addressed within the interviews, along with input regarding gaps in practice that the parents thought the preschool should further develop. Axial coding of the open-ended question responses was conducted to identify major themes.

Findings

Survey data identified that, overall, parents have a solid understanding of the school's purpose, as stated in its mission. Although the parents appreciated the preschool's flexible hours, the findings indicated that the school's mission and philosophy were the primary reasons parents decided to enroll their children at the preschool. As it relates to the institutional functions, parents likewise had a thorough understanding of the activities their children were engaged in at the preschool due to the Seesaw® app . Parents' input suggested that there were no gaps in practice, and the activities their children were engaged in at the preschool aligned with the school's mission. However, some parents expressed frustration about not knowing how to help their child continue to grow at home and wished they could receive more feedback on this area from the school. Regarding school achievement, parents thought the school was highly effective at achieving its objectives. The primary perception indicator parents used for determining school effectiveness was the happiness their children displayed once they arrived home. Finally, as to what needs to be improved, parents did not believe anything should be changed regarding the school's mission or activities. Most parents stated, however, that communication was the school's weakest area, especially when it came to understanding their own child's progress.

Recommendations

Four key recommendations emerged from the study findings. First, the school should maintain many of its current activities, including its flexible hours, and remain focused on its Reggio-inspired mission, as parents were quite satisfied with these functional areas. Secondly, the preschool should consider offering parent education sessions where school personnel highlight their teaching expertise and share with



parents some ideas for extending learning at home. Third, the preschool should consider providing both current and prospective parents with opportunities to understand the value the school provides children who attend, including both the short-term and long-term benefits. Finally, the most important recommendation identified from the findings was that parents felt they deserved clearer and more consistent feedback about their child's learning and growth. As a result of the interviews, albeit from a limited number of parents, this was an anticipated recommendation outcome, so the survey included a question asking the parents the best delivery format for the learning and growth feedback. Accordingly, the findings suggest that most parents prefer written comments or observations.

The stakeholder analysis assessing the alignment between the Reggio-inspired preschool's mission, activities, and achievement identified that all stakeholders, especially the parents, were very satisfied with the preschool's delivery of its philosophical promise. By maintaining the alignment between the philosophy and institutional functions, the study outcomes found no gaps between mission and practice based on the IEGA conceptual framework. The Reggio-inspired preschool is doing and achieving what is stated in its mission and purpose. The main area of improvement that emerged from the study was the need for enhanced communication with parents about their child's progress.

Keywords: Institutional effectiveness, Reggio Emilia, early childhood education and care, preschools, stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

“Observe and listen to children because when they ask ‘why?’ they are not simply asking for the answer from you. They are requesting the courage to find a collection of possible answers.”
- Carlina Rinaldi (2004), President of Reggio Children

This quote serves as encouragement to preschool educators to broaden their perspectives regarding a child’s reason for asking “why?” Like a child’s inquiry, the research process also requests the courage to discover a compilation of possible responses. This is especially true for a newly launched Reggio-inspired preschool that has experienced success but has not formally questioned *why*, or whether most of its customers are pleased with the education services it provides their children. Consequently, this capstone project explores the alignment of the preschool’s delivery of services per the Reggio Emilia philosophy from stakeholders’ perspectives to determine if the preschool is realizing its mission.

The Reggio-inspired preschool that is the focal organization of this study was established in 2017 with only seven children enrolled. Four years later, during the time of this study in the spring of 2021, there were more than 50 children enrolled along with plans to relocate to a bigger campus in the fall of the same year. The preschool has experienced significant success in a short period of time, yet like most organizations, the future is unforeseeable. Thus, the purpose of this project is to help the preschool acquire stakeholder feedback about the extent to which the preschool is delivering on its mission through its institutional functions, and to determine what areas of the preschool’s operations have a need for further development. Since the preschool director desired to confirm “how the school was doing” through systematic feedback, the conceptual framework for this study helped inform the way I would collect information about the school’s functioning from stakeholders: What the school says should align with what the school does, which should align with the school’s achievements; furthermore, any areas of improvement should flow from one of the aforementioned three areas (Volkwein, 2003).

The school’s willing participation in this mixed-method quality improvement project corresponds with the Reggio approach. Like the philosophy that guides them, Reggio Emilia-inspired schools tend to be places where their leaders and teachers embrace opportunities for learning. At the root of this pedagogical approach is an image of the child as having rights and being worthy of respect (Malaguzzi, 1994). Within this system of education, children are seen as active participants in their own learning who construct knowledge, often through research while their teachers document learning via a practice called pedagogical documentation (Malaguzzi, 1994). According to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, projects which stem from provocations give children “the

opportunity to explore, observe, question, discuss, hypothesize, represent, and then proceed to revisit their initial observations and hypotheses” (Hewett, 2001, p. 96). Correspondingly, knowledge is constructed and there are multiple ways of expressing meaning, whether that be through “sculpture, drawing, painting, dance, drama, writing, and puppetry” (pp. 98-99), which are just a few of the ‘one hundred languages’ of children that typify this Reggio philosophy of education. Moreover, from this perspective, children construct knowledge not in isolation but among peers and adults. They are highly social and learn through relationships that require “collaboration, dialogue, conflict, negotiation, and cooperation” (p. 96).

After conducting a comprehensive review of the literature to learn more about the preschool’s Reggio-inspired approach, I conducted several observational visits to the preschool, which provided me with a contextual understanding of the kind of environment that had been created for the children. These observational visits and discussions with its founder helped drive the development of the semi-structured interview questions for the initial qualitative phase of the project. Afterwards, to understand the experiences of individuals close to the organization, I engaged in several conversations with multiple stakeholders to identify how they perceived the school’s mission, activities, and achievements. Once the meaning-making processes of the preschool’s stakeholders was understood, a second quantitative research phase was initiated which included the development of a survey instrument to assess the stakeholders’ perceptions from a larger proportion of the preschool’s population regarding the same topics. The following sections describe in more depth the mixed methods research design and methodology, the findings, and the resultant recommendations.

ORGANIZATION CONTEXT and PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The context for this study is a Reggio-inspired preschool in a midwestern city for children ages three through five. The preschool employs one administrator, two lead teachers, and three additional support staff members who assist the lead teachers in the classroom and at lunch. The preschool’s mission states that it seeks to “empower children to discover themselves and the world around them, as they become critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and collaborative community members. We aim to inspire children to lead mindful, peaceful, and purposeful lives.”

When I first contacted the director in the summer of 2020, she noted that there had never been an attempt to collect feedback from parents. Occasionally, she would hear from parents regarding how happy they were that their child was experiencing so much success in kindergarten; however, beyond that the school had never formally requested any kind of feedback from its stakeholders, which could then be used for the purpose of continuous improvement. Correspondingly, the lack of feedback from stakeholders about how well the school’s institutional functioning aligned with its mission and what

areas they felt needed to be improved was identified as the problem of practice for this project. This problem is critical for schools to solve, as Perez (2015) notes, "It is important for schools not only to know the impact of their work, but also to understand how their daily operations bring their mission to life" (p. 6) This research project served as an opportunity for the school leader to better understand stakeholders' perspectives regarding the school's mission (what the school says), to what extent it was aligned with its institutional functions (what the school does), and whether it was effective (what the school achieves). Ultimately, this is a study about a Reggio-inspired preschool's institutional effectiveness, as Volkwein's (2003) framework for institutional effectiveness considers it to be the alignment between "what you say," "what you do," and "what you achieve," and "what needs to be improved."

In the competitive, independent preschool landscape stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, and parents, may be interested in how much the preschool's practices align with its mission, as well as the extent to which they meet or exceed stated goals. Therefore, assessing the alignment between mission and practices from the stakeholders' perspectives was the focus of this project. This study analyzes the perspective of the preschool's stakeholders regarding its mission (what the school says), practices (what the school does), and achievements (what the school achieves) to determine what areas stakeholders feel are in alignment with the Reggio-inspired school's mission and should remain the same and what practices are unaligned and, as a result, should be improved. The identification of any gaps between mission and practice is the goal of the project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the time this study was initiated, the Reggio-inspired preschool had not initiated any type of formal assessment to gain an in-depth understanding between the alignment of the school mission and its practices from stakeholders' perspectives. The purpose of the project is to determine if there were any gaps in practice that hinder the preschool from realizing its mission from stakeholder perspectives. A review of the literature further informed this study through findings from research on school mission statements, institutional effectiveness, philosophies of effectiveness in early childhood settings, learning dispositions that are often part of a school's goals, parent engagement, and factors influencing parent satisfaction with a child's school.

From a macro-level perspective, literature related to mission statements and institutional effectiveness provides guidance on how organizations' operationalization of their missions ensures that their practices are consistent with their stated goals. Moreover, given that the preschool was inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, research on how effectiveness is determined through formative assessments within this approach, known as pedagogical documentation, was another focal area of this review (Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

Volkwein (2003) asserts that an organization's mission, its everyday practices and functions, and its assessments of achievement go hand in hand. Therefore, I conducted a focused review of the preschool's mission. Consideration of whether or not the school was achieving its purpose required an in-depth analysis of the "noncognitive" or "soft skills" elements of its mission (Claxton, Costa, & Kallick, 2016). The literature in this area revealed that these elements, which are embedded in the preschool's mission, are commonly called learning dispositions and are often sought after not only in other Reggio-inspired settings but also in the Te Whāriki early childhood curriculum in New Zealand (Claxton & Carr, 2004). As a result, I draw on the work of Margaret Carr and her colleagues (2002, 2004, 2008, 2014) who have spent much of their careers focused on operationalizing a framework for learning dispositions, which is an ideal way to describe many of the elements of an independent preschool's mission statement like the one belonging to the Reggio-inspired preschool in this study.

Parents play a central role as partners in children's learning in all settings, but especially in early childhood programs within independent schools. This type of enrollment necessitates parental engagement in the assessment processes. Therefore, studies that examine which factors shape parents' perceptions of school quality where parents are making an active decision to fund their child's education provided important context for the study.

Finally, there was a gap in the literature related to the synthesis of the areas of focus discussed within this project. After conducting multiple searches from numerous databases, it was determined that there was limited or no previous research related to the assessment of alignment between mission and practices in preschools, specifically within a Reggio-inspired setting from stakeholders' perspectives. Resultantly, this literature review will contribute to the field by discussing critical contextual elements necessary to examine and understand when assessing a school's alignment between its mission (what the school says), activities (what the school does), and achievements (what the school achieves).

Mission Statements and Learning Dispositions

Boerema (2006) analyzed the mission statements of 81 private schools (some religious and some secular) in British Columbia, Canada. He concluded that despite their "rich variety," four overarching goals typified the schools' mission statements: 1) development of academic or intellectual ability, 2) personal development, 3) social development, and 4) physical development. All the private school groups he studied shared a focus in their mission statements on the "noted the importance of personal development for their students. Various aspects of personal development were mentioned, including self-confidence, self-worth, or self-esteem; respect; responsibility;

integrity; and character development” (p. 195). These aspects are attractive to parents who choose these environments for their children because often they are “maximizing for goals that arise from a family, church, or local community” (Boerema, 2006, p. 199).

Mission statements are integral to schools because they are often required for accreditation (Gow, 2009) and in some cases to ensure tax exempt status in the U.S. (Brinckerhoff, 2000). Beyond the need for mission statements to satisfy external organizations’ requirements, schools also benefit from a clear mission statement to guide organizational performance (Boerema, 2006). As a result, schools benefit from understanding whether alignment exists between the organization’s mission and its goals (Hirschfield, 2009; Gow, 2009; Hendrie, 1996).

To assess how well a school is accomplishing its mission, it is first necessary to deeply understand the mission and the elements within it. This in-depth approach likewise includes how each area can be assessed. Aims like the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool’s that focus on whole child development, self-discovery, creative problem-solving, purposeful living, and developing collaborative community members are often found in many schools’ mission statements, especially of independent preschools. Some have labeled these elements of mission statements skills or soft skills, and others have called them “noncognitive skills” because they are not explicitly academic. One of the first groups of scholars to define learning dispositions was Perkins, Jay, and Tishman (1993), who described the construct from a psychological perspective as consisting of three elements: inclination toward a behavior, sensitivity toward situations when that behavior would be fruitful, and ability to carry out the behavior well.

Other scholars have chosen to refine the concept of learning dispositions for an educational setting. For instance, studying the Te Whāriki (pronounced: Te-FAR-i-key) schools of New Zealand, Claxton and Carr (2004) advanced the notion of learning dispositions to describe “the attitudes, values, and habits towards learning” that these phrases often encompass. They describe them as “default responses in the presence of uncertain learning opportunities and circumstances” (p. 88). Unlike clearly measurable skills that might have a defined endpoint, Claxton and Carr make a point to communicate the richness of learning dispositions. They offer the following example, which demonstrates how learning in these areas is flexible and occurs at various levels of depth:

Children’s persisting, questioning or collaborating can develop in flexibility and sophistication. Whereas at one time ‘persisting’ may simply have meant not giving up on a problem, later it can incorporate more elaborate strategies for mood repair, emotional maintenance or marshalling assistance, and these strategies may become more subtle, and more delicately contingent on the sources of support or recuperation that particular environments afford. (p. 90)

Interestingly, relatively few studies on dispositions directly cite John Dewey, one of the preeminent educational theorists of the 20th century, but his work is clearly relevant given his reference to learning habits. In fact, Nelsen (2015) argues that teachers should see learning dispositions as “clusters of habits” (p. 86). While his focus is on whether teachers can develop learning dispositions over time (or whether they are fixed aspects of one’s character), his close analysis of Dewey’s work on learning habits reveals valuable insights that are relevant to students as well. For example, he notes that Dewey (1988) uses the words “habits” and “dispositions” almost interchangeably, but Nelsen makes the point that, in his own writing, he refers to dispositions as “tendencies to respond in specific ways to given stimuli in specific contexts, thus, a single disposition can be usefully described through a set of interrelated habits” (p. 89). Though Nelsen does not refer to the work of Claxton and Carr (2004), his conclusions move their work forward in an important way: By conceptualizing learning dispositions as clusters of habits, educators can begin to identify and cultivate environments that shape the habits that come together to shape the students learning dispositions.

Considering the inherent complexity of learning dispositions and their situated nature, teachers in the context of Te Whāriki apply an assessment method called learning stories to monitor progress toward the development of learning dispositions. Learning stories are narratives that capture a learning episode as short as ten minutes, written by teachers that interpret children’s learning. Carr et al. (2002) have described the process of creating learning stories by teachers in four stages: describing children’s capabilities, discussing with colleagues to possibly derive new meanings, documenting children’s words and actions, which can include photographs and other work samples, and deciding how those actions relate to the learning dispositions teachers are seeking to develop.

Based on the prior description of learning dispositions, there is a connection between how researchers have described learning dispositions and how the Reggio-inspired preschool in this study describes its mission. Specifically, “becoming a collaborative community member; a creative problem-solver; a critical thinker; and a mindful, peaceful, and purposeful being” are not attributes that can be assessed just once and “checked off” as complete. The concepts qualify as learning dispositions because they are made up of habits that are developed to various degrees over time.

In collaboration with other researchers, Karlsdóttir and Garðarsdóttir (2010) studied an Icelandic Reggio-inspired preschool whose teachers used learning stories, and they found that the process of documenting children’s learning through learning stories might help teachers better support their students, as well as help the teachers recognize each child’s strengths. In addition, Karlsdóttir and Garðarsdóttir noted that since the creation of learning stories was a new practice in the preschool they were

studying, they felt teachers could have benefitted from more support early in the documentation process to ensure they did so with more depth and frequency. Although the previously mentioned research found learning stories to be of assessment value, not all researchers are keen on the assessment of learning dispositions through learning stories. Some scholars have criticized the use of learning stories because of their qualitative nature and have argued that this assessment method lacks validity since the concepts they are seeking to assess, learning dispositions, are themselves not clearly defined (Blaiklock, 2008; Royce Sadler, 2002). It is likely that those who raise these questions align with more of a positivist ontology because they believe there is a truth to be discovered and deemed “valid” from research; whereas practitioners of sociocultural research tend to be grounded in more of a pragmatist ontology. Sociocultural researchers believe there is more than one truth and many different realities to be discovered. Correspondingly, the pragmatist-ontology assumption is that the more data that can be collected, the closer the research will come to discovering the truth (McInerney, Walker, & Liem, 2011). For example, Mitchell and Carr’s (2014) *Democratic and Learning Oriented Assessment Practices in Early Childhood Care and Education* report published a chart, that is reproduced to the right, which contrasts two models of assessment: 1) the traditional model used in many schools that focuses on measuring progress toward discrete content and skills, and 2) the learning stories model.

Assumptions about	Assessment Model One	Assessment Model Two
Outcomes of interest	A list of fragmented skills and items of knowledge that describe competence, often with a reference to school entry.	A list of ‘life-long learning’ strategies and dispositions. A longer term vision of a citizen in a democratic society.
Focus for intervention	Deficit-oriented. Gap-filling is emphasized.	Strengths, disposition-enhancing, are emphasized.
Units of analysis	Skills and items of knowledge.	Episodes of learning as narratives.
Validity	Objective observation.	Interpreted observations and dialogue.
Progress	Hierarchies of skills and knowledges, an accumulation of valued knowledge.	Increasingly complex participation in a learning environment.
Value to practitioners	Surveillance by external agencies. Planning for filling gaps in skill or knowledge.	Communication with four audiences: children, families, other staff and self [the practitioner writing the story, perhaps for or with the children]. Planning for strengthening participation repertoires.
Who does the assessing?	The practitioners.	A democratic process. The <i>children</i> dictate stories and take photographs, the <i>families</i> contribute comments, the <i>practitioners</i> add stories, and revisit the collection with the child or children, enabling re-telling, re-cognizing, and the collaborative construction of trajectories of learning.

Figure 1: Two Models of Assessment and Associated Outcomes (Mitchell & Carr, 2014, p. 14)

Perhaps the opposing researchers take issue with the sociocultural tradition of inquiry guiding concepts of learning stories that assesses learning dispositions. Yet, Claxton and Carr (2004) make their grounding philosophy clear; in fact, they argue that learning dispositions don’t develop, *and therefore can’t be measured*, in isolation; rather, they emerge in the context of a classroom that is also a “learning community” as described by Rogoff (1990), Brown et al. (1993), and Burton (2002). Claxton and Carr discuss prohibiting environments, affording environments, inviting environments, and

potentiating environments. The latter potentiating environment offers opportunities for children to show certain learning dispositions and actively develops other learning dispositions within children. In these environments, teachers “explain, orchestrate, commentate on and model learning responses, and frequently the children do too” (p. 95). This learning disposition characteristic is the distinguishing factor between the potentiating environment and the other type of learning communities.

Like Claxton and Carr (2004) in their research, Hedges and Cullen (2012) also draw on Rogoff’s theories of learning through participation in community. Hedges and Cullen argue that, in contrast to what is commonly understood as western, monocultural, developmental perspectives on learning, the development of learning should be from a sociocultural perspective, that is, acquiring knowledge and learning “skills, dispositions and other process outcomes through participation (p. 931). The scholars have named this engagement approach to early childhood pedagogy a “participation plus” model because children acquire knowledge and skills while actively participating in the cultural activity of meaning-making due to the processes of participation. In this way, Hedges and Cullen posit that “both process and outcomes are important” (p. 926). Given this focus on participation in the context of assessing learning dispositions through learning stories, it should come as no surprise that the practice itself aims to be democratic in nature. In response to standards-based assessment reforms, Mitchell (2019) defends New Zealand’s early childhood learning story assessment practices and writes that: “Assessment practices that have democracy in mind will include the views of those being assessed, build a culture of success and be open to contribution from children, families and community. Valued outcomes will include learning dispositions and working theories to support democratic citizenship and lifelong learning” (p. 87).

As this section has demonstrated, the identification and assessment of learning dispositions has a beginning foundation in the early childhood settings of New Zealand. However, learning stories are not the only way to assess learning dispositions, in Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools, pedagogical documentation is the traditional approach to assessing achievement.

Evaluation and Assessment in Early Childhood Settings

Evaluation in early childhood education programs is rare, and Moss and Dahlberg (2008) push back on traditional ways of evaluating educational settings. They argue that “quality” is a concept that is too simple to capture the complexity and diversity inherent in society. Instead, the scholars favor evaluation in the form of “meaning making,” which they defined as “a participatory process of interpretation and judgement, made within a recognized context and in relation to certain critical questions” (p. 6). Moss and Dahlberg argue that unlike a focus on “quality,” which comes from a managerial discourse, “meaning-making” comes from a democratic

discourse because it values multiple perspectives.

Consistent with this goal of making meaning out of a learning environment, pedagogical documentation is central to the Reggio Emilia approach, where evidence of learning is displayed on panels. These panels offer children a way to remember where they have been in their learning journey, give teachers the opportunity to reflect on, evaluate, and reimagine their work with children, and provide parents with a record of their child's learning experiences in the school. Because parents and community members are considered partners in the teaching and learning of children, panels make it possible for those who are not at the school every day to remain involved.

As noted in the description of the fundamental ideas behind the Reggio Emilia approach, pedagogical documentation is an important aspect of the teacher's role. In contrast with traditional forms of assessment that aim to compare a child's progress to a pre-defined benchmark of achievement and point out children's learning deficits, the focus of pedagogical documentation is on viewing the child as a competent person, rich in experiences and full of potential (Rinaldi, 2004). Tiziana Filippini, Coordinator of the Documentation and Educational Research Centre of Reggio Emilia and pedagogical coordinator for schools in Reggio Emilia, described documentation as "an essential tool for listening, observing, and evaluating the nature of our experience" (Turner & Wilson, 2009, p. 6). This is a departure from how traditional summative assessments define a child's learning; in fact, some scholars describe pedagogical documentation as an attitude, or a way of seeing, that persists throughout the learning experience not just at the end once it has been completed (Mitchell, 2019; Turner & Wilson, 2009).

Empirical research studies about pedagogical documentation often focus on the practices and perspectives of the teachers involved. For example, Picchio, Giovannini, Mayer, and Musatti (2012), studied the documentation procedures used by teachers in an Italian preschool and found that narrative form was the most common format. The scholars also indicated that within the approach the timing of documentation was intentionally varied so that sometimes teachers were reporting on learning weekly (weekly reports) and other times they were reflecting on the longer-term learning of their students (process reports). Furthermore, the kind of reports the teachers were writing shaped their reflective practices and strengthened collegiality. Correspondingly, their finding supports the work of Moran, Desrochers, and Cavicchi (2007), who studied documentation practices in a school community for over 10 years and concluded that documentation became a communal activity that involved not just teachers but also the children, which changed the culture of participation at the school. Moreover, MacDonald (2007) introduced pedagogical documentation as an assessment practice to teachers who, after implementing it for six months, reported that it "contributed to their awareness of learning processes" (p. 238). One teacher within MacDonald's research even mentioned that the process helped her create new activities to help her students

meet desired outcomes, while other teachers in the study mentioned that they were able to understand their students better due to pedagogical documentation, including what additional skills the students had beyond those they were originally trying to assess (MacDonald, 2007). In synthesis, these empirical studies demonstrate that pedagogical documentation can have wide-ranging benefits on faculty collegiality, reflection practices, understanding of one's students, and even teaching practices.

Despite the benefits of pedagogical documentation, Picchio et al. (2012) also address some of the challenge's teachers faced in the report making process. To help to mitigate some of those challenges, Knauf (2020) looked at the strategies early childhood teachers in Germany and New Zealand used to integrate documentation into their daily work. Using a comparative qualitative approach, Knauf's findings emphasized "the profound influence the organizational framework conditions have on pedagogical practice." The scholar concludes, "(t)he presence or absence of particular resources: time, opportunities for discussion, computer, documentation software, digital platforms, determines which strategies are—or can be—applied" (p. 18). Like Knauf's work, Moran, Desrochers, and Cavicchi (2007) noted that over the ten years they studied school settings, teacher planning and pedagogical documentation became a more formal, intertwined process, and that this was made possible by administrator encouragement, resources, and the timing of meetings. Given the involved and time-consuming nature of pedagogical documentation, the research highlights the important role administrators and school leaders play in developing and maintaining organizational frameworks that support this work; skilled teachers are not enough.

A recent review of the empirical research on Reggio-inspired approaches found that there is a lack of outcome research on Reggio-inspired programs (Emerson & Linder, 2019). Reggio-inspired approaches are those implemented by practitioners outside of the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Most of the research Emerson and Linder (2019) reviewed focused on teacher voices regarding the Reggio approach (how they approached their work in this setting, how they viewed the children, etc.) or administrator and educational leader perspectives on blending the Reggio approach with other approaches in settings outside of Italy. Emerson and Linder (2019) suggest a reframing of the literature in the context of the international adjustment framework (based on where the educators in focus were in the transition to this new pedagogy). Though this call for a re-framing of the research appears to be an outlier, it does raise an important point about the value in considering the context from which teachers' beliefs emerge and the context in which they implement Reggio-inspired practices.

Not all scholars have positive things to say about pedagogical documentation. For example, Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, and Meacham (2016) argue that "documentation of learning on teacher's demand leads to surveillance, discipline, distraction, and robbing of students from ownership of their education" (p. 6). They frame pedagogical

documentation in practice as primarily teacher-initiated and, as a result, believe the process “objectivizes” students (p. 6). While it’s relevant to note that these authors have fundamental differences in the way they view education because they argue that it should remain “private” (and that learning is simply a by-product) rather than “social” the way Reggio Emilia practitioners conceive it, their concern about the role of children in pedagogical documentation is not unfounded. In her research, Pettersson (2015) specifically focused on the role of children in the documentation process and found that their level of participation varied. Using examples from observations of the classroom setting, she categorized children’s participation in three ways: attendance, involvement, and influence. She noted that children’s participation was often restricted to certain areas (i.e., not involved with topic selection, taking photos, etc.), and that teachers’ ideas about what needed to be documented and the ways to do that influenced the extent to which children could get involved. While it should come as no surprise that there is variation in pedagogical documentation practices based on the setting and even the teacher, this recognition necessitates careful attention to the context and the processes utilized by teachers when studying pedagogical documentation in Reggio-inspired schools.

Unlike traditional assessments, like tests, which purport to be “objective” and straightforward, the Reggio Emilia approach to pedagogical documentation as a form of assessment is much more complex. After all, it is a way of seeing, interpreting, valuing, and communicating learning—all of which might be considered subjective because they involve individuals making meaning out of experience. Carla Rinaldi, President of the organization Reggio Children, writes:

[Documentation] allow[s] us to make visible the process of children’s learning, the ways to construct knowledge, the emotional and relational aspects; in fact, all the facets that contribute to leave traces of a competent observation. ... Through documentation we leave traces that make it possible to share the ways children learn, and through documentation we can preserve the most interesting and advanced moments of teachers’ professional growth. It is a process in which teachers generate hypotheses and interpretations of theories that can modify the initial, more general theories [about children’s learning]. (Rinaldi, 1998, pp. 120-121)

Notably, it’s not only the teacher and students who take part in documentation the way it is intended by proponents of the Reggio Emilia approach. Given the democratic nature of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, parents, families, and community members often play valuable roles in the process as well. The next section considers this topic of family engagement in assessment and satisfaction with a child’s school.

Family Engagement in Assessment and Satisfaction with School

Mitchell (2019) discusses how the democratic nature of documentation practices in New Zealand, which are comparable to what is expected in the Reggio Emilia approach, means that parents are not only “recipients” but also “contributors” to the process (p. 102). For example, at one preschool, teachers sought out the perspective of parents to help shape the direction of projects, and parents also had input into the learning stories teachers crafted (Mitchell et al., 2015). Additionally, by partnering with parents and communicating with them regularly, teachers can facilitate continuity between children’s home and school experiences. In one situation a mother told a teacher how her son had changed the lyrics to a song he sang at school, and with that information the teacher invited him to do so in the classroom as well, which led to all the children adopting the new lyrics (van Wijk et al., 2006). Ensuring the families can play a role in assessment practices also includes writing narratives about children that are free of jargon which might be confusing to parents (Rameka, 2009).

Parent participation in documentation practices is not only beneficial for children to maintain continuity between home and school, but it’s also valuable in helping parents feel satisfied with their decision to send their child to a Reggio Emilia-inspired school. Harris’s (2019) phenomenological study of parents’ experiences of sending their children to Reggio-inspired schools found that all of them “had a deep satisfaction” (p. 9). They appreciated feeling deeply in tune with the school’s constructivist practices, which was likely a result of what they described as daily documentation they received in the form of photographs, quotes, and text (Harris, 2019). This finding, which was a common theme across the interviews, is especially relevant to independent school settings where tuition payments can sometimes lead to the expectation that involvement and awareness of what’s going on at their child’s school will be high. MacDonald (2007) found that even in settings where pedagogical documentation had only been used for a short period of time, parents expressed that they found it useful. Her study introduced teachers to pedagogical documentation as a method of assessment and then analyzed parent responses. Though her work did not take place in a Reggio-inspired school, the value of pedagogical documentation as a form of assessment, from the perspective of parents and teachers, was made evident.

Whereas MacDonald’s (2007) research focused on parents’ and teachers’ pedagogical documentation, Parnell, Justice, and Patrick (2018) expanded the scope to include community members within the process. Their assumption was that pedagogical documentation participation doesn’t have to remain limited to parents alone. As a result, the researchers conducted a study at the Helen Gordon Child Development Center at Portland State University. During the study teachers, parents, extended family members, and community members engaged in pedagogical documentation by documenting the learning that took place at the school. Parnell,

Justice, and Patrick (2018) found that including extended family and community members, in addition to parents, in the pedagogical documentation curriculum was facilitated by hosting “curriculum gatherings” which focused on big ideas. The findings identified that curriculum gatherings, “enticed more engagement, fostered better understanding of the school’s core philosophies, and brought about a co-construction of ideas for the children’s living and learning” (p. 25). In addition, for this expanded stakeholder inclusion, the researchers had them engage in various types of pedagogical documentation activities. The activities included: wall panels; micro books; password-protected blogs; invitation-only social media pages; emails; and another event, Friends and Family Day. The study concluded that expanding pedagogical documentation to include beyond-parent stakeholders, such as extended family and community members, resulted in increased interest in the children’s education and activities at school and in furthering learning both at school and at home.

Ultimately, parents make the decision about where their young children attend school, and this is especially true at independent schools. Beyond their views of assessing their child’s individual achievements, their perception of school quality is very critical to the success of an independent school. Gibbons and Silva (2011) found that parents’ assessments regarding school quality were most influenced by test scores. Since tests aren’t given to preschoolers, one goal of the present study was to determine what factors influenced stakeholder views of quality in the preschool setting.

Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness in Schools

Given my literature review’s focus on trying to understand how scholars have understood school missions and the learning dispositions within them as well as how early childhood settings have evaluated their activities, used pedagogical documentation to record progress, and taken into account factors shaping parent satisfaction with their child’s school, I sought to identify a field of study that could bring these areas together. The literature on institutional effectiveness proved to be critical for determining how I might approach the preschool’s problem of practice.

Several important studies examine the processes for assessing institutional effectiveness, which according to Volkwein (2003) is considered to be the alignment between “what you say,” “what you do,” and “what you achieve,” and “what needs to be improved.” Although assessing alignment can be defined conceptually as a linear process, previous attempts to explain institutional effectiveness, such as in Nichols’ (1989) work on *Institutional Effectiveness and Outcomes Assessment Implementation on Campus: A Practitioner’s Handbook*, emphasized a cyclical process with elements of purpose and objectives, assessment, and adjustment because of the results of the assessment being an on-going process. Since measuring outcomes is a central component of determining the effectiveness of an educational institution, in some literature institutional effectiveness is referred to as an outcomes assessment (Nichols,

1989). However, other scholars prefer the term institutional effectiveness over the term outcomes assessment because it avoids the perception that one is only measuring the outcomes of an institution's academic departments alone (Nichols, 1989). Institutional effectiveness encompasses the variety of "programmatic intentions" that are part of a school's purpose beyond just academics (Nichols, 1989).

The practice of seeking to determine institutional effectiveness and assessing student outcomes dates to the 1980s and developed from federal educational policy recommendations for higher education institutions (Nichols, 1989). As a result, accrediting agencies such as the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) issued guidance which stated that each institution needed to "demonstrate that it is accomplishing its purposes" (COPA, 1986, p. 7). Often, accreditation is used as an accountability tool to ensure schools that receive funding are doing what they say they will do and using the money effectively (Alorook, 2011).

Around the same time that accrediting agencies for higher education institutions were beginning to align with institutional effectiveness frameworks, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) likewise established a voluntary accreditation system for early childhood programs. The National Research Council (2008) notes that early childhood learning standards stem from the desire "to improve program quality for all children" (p. 48). By 2000, early childhood programs like Head Start, a federally funded program primarily for low-income children, had developed its own performance measures conceptual framework, seen to the right (National Research Council, 2008). However, the processes and outcomes summarized in this framework were inadequate to assess a private preschool's institutional functioning. Suitably, parent partnership in private preschool settings tend to be expected given the cost associated with private programs and the clientele they serve.

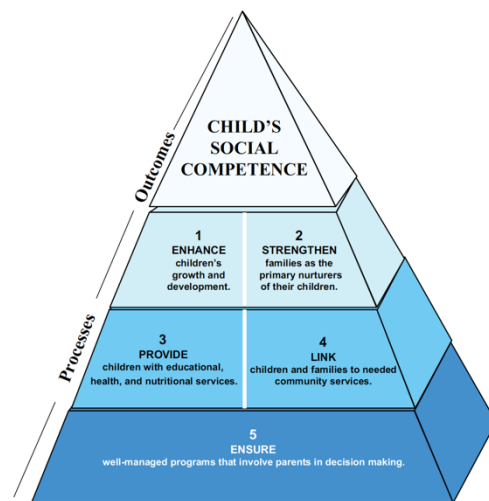


Figure 2: Performance Measures Conceptual Framework for the Head Start Organization (National Research Council, 2008)

While most of the aforementioned studies focus on colleges and higher education institutions of learning, the insights gleaned around the relationship between an institution's mission statement, its institutional functions, and its assessed effectiveness were used to frame the research questions for this study and focused the research on the way in which the preschool puts its mission statement into practice and

assesses its students' progress toward the learning areas they prioritize in their mission.

The review of the literature examined how schools have traditionally evaluated institution alignment and effectiveness in education programs. According to Volkwein (2003), alignment is continuity between a school's mission and practice that can be conceptualized as "what you say," "what you do," and "what you achieve," and "what needs to be improved." In addition, effectiveness was established as a school realizing its mission and delivering "quality" aligned education. The focus of the literature review aligned with the basis of the Reggio-inspired preschool's problem of practice. In synopsis, the problem in this study was that the preschool had not yet conducted a formal evaluation of stakeholder perspectives to identify whether there were any gaps between mission and practice and to ensure that the school's mission, activities, and achievements were aligned. Given Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence's (2007) insistence that we replace the concept of "quality" with "meaning-making," which involves "making practice visible," I explored the ways in which elements of the preschool's mission had been made visible in other settings. This led to a review of the literature regarding learning dispositions, otherwise referred to as collections of habits, that characterize the various concepts implicated in the preschool's mission. Learning dispositions are widely used in New Zealand's early childhood program assessments. Therefore, I considered the ways in which those schools assess using learning stories. Finally, a close read of the literature regarding one Reggio Emilia-inspired school's assessment practice, pedagogical documentation, including the role of parents in that process, as well as what factors shaped parental satisfaction, helped ground the methodology of this research from previously conducted studies. The next section expands on Volkwein's model for institutional effectiveness, which is the conceptual framework guiding my research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework guiding this study is Volkwein's (2003) framework for Institutional Effectiveness through Governance and Administration. Shown in Figure 3, this model splits institutional effectiveness into four categories: what you say, what you do, what you achieve, and what needs to be improved (Commission on Higher Education, 1996). This straightforward approach allows someone not closely acquainted with an organization to understand the four major domains of its institutional cycle quickly based on what the organization's mission and purposes are, what activities it engages in, what it achieves, and finally what areas are ripe for change.

Volkwein's framework for evaluating institutional effectiveness is designed for higher education, where student academic attainment is the primary goal. While serving as the Chair for a Task Force on the Commission on Higher Education, Volkwein helped write the Framework for Outcomes Assessment (1996) text, which states, "Student outcomes assessment is the act of assembling, analyzing, and using both qualitative and quantitative evidence of teaching and learning outcomes, in order to examine their congruence with stated purposes and educational objectives and to provide meaningful feedback that will stimulate self-renewal" (p. 7). As a result, student outcomes assessment is at the center of the framework. However, the steps in determining institutional effectiveness that are outlined in this framework can apply to settings beyond higher education.

Volkwein (2003) argues that first organizations must clarify their mission statement and purposes. Next, the institution should articulate its functions, including the primary activities that are intended to deliver the mission. Third, the institution

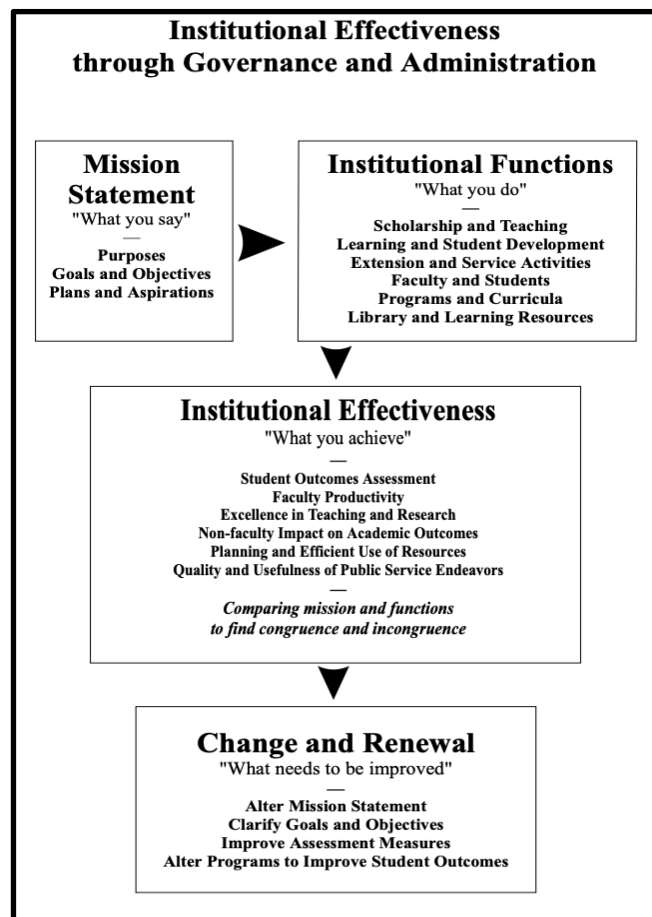


Figure 3: Institutional Effectiveness through Governance and Administration (Commission on Higher Education, 1996)

should use both qualitative and quantitative measures to determine if outcomes are being achieved. Assessment of congruence or incongruence with the mission happens in this step. Finally, schools must determine what their opportunities are for improvement, which typically become clear when administrators find “incongruity between campus goals and actual outcomes” (Volkwein, 2003). The greater the overlap between an institution’s mission, or its aspirations, and its outcomes, the more likely an institution will be successful in its accreditation process (Commission on Higher Education, 1996). This institutional cycle can be part of both a formative evaluation process aiming for improvement or a summative evaluation process aiming for accountability (Volkwein, 2003).

Given that the preschool had not solicited key stakeholders’ feedback on these areas in a formal way, this framework offered a structured way of organizing the research project. Moreover, the categories are broad enough that they can apply beyond the higher education settings for which it was originally developed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study explores four research questions, which stem from Volkwein’s (2003) model of Institutional Effectiveness and Governance Administration. An added component of these questions that is not part of Volkwein’s framework is a focus on stakeholders. This was important because schools, especially for society’s youngest learners, are primarily relational; the views of stakeholders matter. Moreover, the Reggio Emilia approach prioritizes participation of all stakeholders (Yu, 2019).

1. *What the school says*: What are stakeholders’ understandings of the purposes, goals, objectives, plans, and aspirations of the school?
2. *What the school does*: Do stakeholders feel that the activities and practices their child engages in at school facilitate their child’s growth? How do stakeholders contribute to these?
3. *What the school achieves*: How do stakeholders know that goals and objectives are being achieved? What are the roles of the stakeholders in assessing the achievement of those goals?
4. *What the school needs to improve*: What do stakeholders believe should be improved to better meet the school’s purposes, goals, objectives, plans, and aspirations?

Figure 4 displays how each of these four research questions aligns with one another based on the sequence provided in Volkwein's framework for evaluating institutional effectiveness.

Figure 4: Since all four aspects of a school's functioning – its mission, activities, achievements, and areas for improvement – need to fit together and align, I have represented Volkwein's (2003) framework as applied to my research questions using a jigsaw model.



PROJECT DESIGN

To answer the research questions comprehensively, I designed an exploratory sequential mixed methods design that spanned eight months (October 2020-May 2021). Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) describe this research design as involving two major components that occur in a sequential order: an exploratory qualitative phase followed by a confirmatory quantitative phase. The purpose of the qualitative phase was to establish a contextual understanding before conducting a quantitative survey. Scholars of research methods have discussed a variety of reasons for employing a mixed methods approach, but the purpose in the case of this project was for instrument development (Bryman, 2006). As a result, data collection and analysis occurred in three sequential phases: 1) building understanding of the context, 2) hearing from a subset of individual stakeholders, and 3) confirming what was conveyed in interviews via a survey of all parents. The observations conducted in phase one helped guide the development of interview questions for phase two. In addition, the qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with parents and staff in phase two were intended to help design a mostly quantitative, closed-ended survey that could be sent to the broader community of stakeholders in phase three.

All the questions I asked in interviews and in the survey related back to my four research questions, which were guided by my conceptual framework that splits areas of school functioning into four categories: purpose, activities, achievements, and areas to be improved. These questions address my problem of practice because the school leader sought systematic feedback about the school's functioning and areas to be improved. The school's functioning is comprised of the first three research questions: what the school says, what the school does, and what the school achieves. The final research question asks about what stakeholders believe could be improved.

Phase 1: Qualitative: Establishing A Contextual Understanding

Data Collection: Starting in the fall of 2020, I conducted several field observations of the preschool to understand its context and guide the development of interview questions. I visited the school on three separate occasions and spent time in both classrooms as a participant-observer. I jotted field notes in a notebook following each visit.

Analysis: Given that this project is primarily a stakeholder analysis, analyzing my observations involved reading my notes and ensuring that the questions I had planned to ask stakeholders in the semi-structured interviews were comprehensive, informed by this specific context, and connected to the identified conceptual framework.

Phase 2: Qualitative: Learning from Individual Stakeholder Experiences

Data Collection: I interviewed a total of 13 stakeholders: three staff members and ten parents. The director and two teachers participated in individual, semi-structured interviews via Zoom between January-March (see Appendix A). Since confidentiality was a concern given the small population size among staff (two teachers), teachers were advised they could skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering in the interview. However, both teachers expressed genuine transparency and chose to answer all questions.

Parents were recruited to participate in 20- to 30-minute interviews via a Google Form that was sent by the teachers to all parents in March. Twelve parents responded to the survey, and subsequently the semi-structured interviews were scheduled with ten parents and occurred through Zoom during April 2021 (see Appendix B).

Analysis: Six hours and 35 minutes of interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were coded using MAXQDA software based on the themes shared by interviewees. The process of inductive coding I used involved reading through each person's response to a question I asked and labeling anywhere from one sentence to several sentences with the relevant theme associated with their answer. The resulting codes were *vivo*, meaning they "emerge from the real-life data" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I categorized codes using a hierarchical coding frame based on the question I asked, which related directly back to my conceptual framework, as this allowed me to determine what codes would become answer choices for what questions in the survey I would eventually create. Major coding themes are listed in the chart on the next page titled "Coding System & Relative Frequency of Use for Each Code." The size and color of each square corresponds to the number of times it was mentioned in each interview by a stakeholder.

Since all interview questions were grounded in Volkwein's (2003) framework for institutional effectiveness, I was able to deductively categorize the codes based on this

framework. All red codes have to do with the school’s mission and purpose (“what the school says”). All green codes have to do with the institutional activities (“what the school does”). All blue codes have to do with measuring school effectiveness or child achievement (“what the school achieves”). All yellow codes have to do with areas parents felt could be improved (“what the school can improve”).

Coding System & Relative Frequency of Use for Each Code



Figure 5: Coding System & Relative Frequency of Use for Each Code

Phase 3: Quantitative: Confirming Stakeholder Opinions Via a Survey

Data Collection: Using the responses from the interviews conducted in phase two, I created a survey in Qualtrics (see Appendix C). The survey was divided into four parts based on the conceptual framework guiding this study: purpose, activities, achievements, and areas of improvement. The survey was sent to a total of 82 parents on April 19 by the school director.

The survey omitted any questions asking for identifying information (child’s age, child’s teacher, years attending the school, race, gender, etc.). I made this decision because this was the first parent survey initiated and I wanted to ensure they would feel comfortable being honest in their responses without fear that their answers could be traced back to them. I was concerned that if parents felt they, or their children, could be identified, then there might be a risk they would either not fill it out or be less transparent in their responses, which would have reliability implications regarding the results. A reminder to complete the survey was sent through the school’s Seesaw® app by the two teachers approximately one week later. After three weeks, 38 responses had been collected (45% response rate). 37 of those responses were complete and usable for analysis.

Analysis: Data was exported into Excel to be cleaned and then imported into Tableau for descriptive analyses. I primarily used graphs displaying measures of frequency (counts, frequency, percent of total respondents) and central tendency (means) to understand parents’ satisfaction with the school’s purpose, activities, achievements, and areas to be improved. Given that I was seeking to understand parent satisfaction, I used the data from a question asking parents to rate their likelihood to recommend the preschool to a friend to cross-tabulate the data. This approach allowed me to understand how each of these respondent sub-groups answered certain questions on the survey.

There was one open-ended question at the end of the survey asking what specific areas parents felt could be improved. Just as in vivo coding was used previously to code the interviews, I also used in vivo coding to analyze parent responses to the open-ended question on the survey. The word cloud to the right shows



Figure 6: Codes Used for Open-Ended Survey Question Responses (Size based on frequency)

the themes that emerged; the size of the word or phrase corresponds to its frequency in parent written responses. Some parents focused on areas of success that did *not* need improvement; since the question asked what they felt needed to be improved, I only coded responses that answered this question (22 responses in all).

Figure 7 demonstrates a comprehensive conceptual visualization of the questions asked in each phase of my study and how they relate to the four categories of the conceptual framework guiding this study (what the school says, what the school does, what the school achieves, and what needs to be improved).

Data Collection Methods - Comprehensive Instruments		
Staff Interview	Parent Interview	Parent Survey
<p>What the School Says</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What would you say the school's purpose is? Why does the school exist? 2. What makes your educational approach different from other schools in the area? 3. How would you describe the school's mission to a prospective parent? 4. Can you tell me a bit about the school's plans for the future or long-term vision? <p>What the School Does</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Tell me about a typical day at this school. 6. What kinds of activities do the kids engage with? 7. What is your role in planning or implementing these as the teacher or administrator? 8. How do you identify and target student learning needs through learning experiences? 9. How do you communicate with parents about the activities and learning experiences their children engage in? <p>What the School Achieves</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. How do you know that the school is successful in achieving its goals? 11. What is your role in assessing student outcomes? 12. How do you determine which outcomes to assess based on the school's goals and the methods of assessment? 13. What role (if any) do parents play in assessment? 14. How well do you feel the school uses its resources to achieve its goals? <p>What Needs to Be Improved</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. What, if anything, do you wish were different about the school's mission, goals, or long-term plans? 16. What activities, if any, do you feel should be a part of a student's day at school but aren't now (or are, but shouldn't be)? 17. What, if anything, do you wish were different about the school's communication (frequency or quality) with parents? 18. What, if anything, do you wish were different about your role as a teacher at this school? 19. Is there anything else you would change about the school? 	<p>What the School Says</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What would you say the school's purpose is? 2. What makes the school's educational approach different from other schools in the area? 3. How would you describe the school's mission to a friend who might be considering the school? <p>What the School Does</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Tell me about a typical day for your child at this school. 5. How do you hear about their day? 6. What kinds of activities do you think your child engages in at school that facilitate their growth? 7. What is your role in facilitating your child's growth? (e.g., Do you extend learning opportunities at home and if so how do you do that?) <p>What the School Achieves</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. How do you know that the school is successful in achieving its goals? 9. How would you describe your role in determining your child's progress? 10. Is there an opportunity for you to share with teachers about your experiences with your child at home? Tell me about that. <p>What Needs to Be Improved</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. What, if anything, do you wish were different about the school's mission or goals? 12. What activities, if any, do you feel should be a part of your child's day at school but aren't now (or are, but shouldn't be)? 13. What, if anything, do you wish were different about the school's communication (frequency or quality) with you about your child or their activities? 14. Are you satisfied with your level of involvement at the school? Why or why not? 15. Is there anything else you would change about the school? 	<p>What the School Says</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How well do each of the following describe the school's purpose? (List purposes stated by parents in interviews and include Likert scales) 2. What differentiates the school from other schools in the area? (List differentiating aspects stated by parents in interviews and include Likert scales) 3. Rank order the importance of each of the following in influencing your decision to send your child to Sapling. (Mission included among other options parents mentioned in interview) <p>What the School Does</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Which of the following activities do you think are part of a typical day for your child at school? (List activities stated by parents in interviews and provide multiple checkboxes) 5. What is the primary way you hear about your child's day? (List options stated by parents in interviews) 6. To what extent do you feel the experiences provided to your child at Sapling reflect the school's mission? 7. To what extent do you engage in each of the following activities to facilitate your child's growth? (List activities stated by parents in interviews) 8. How satisfied are you with the opportunities you are given to be involved as a parent at Sapling? <p>What the School Achieves</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Overall, how effective do you feel the school is in achieving its goals? 10. Rank the importance of each of the following in helping you determine whether the school is successful in achieving its goals. (Rank list items mentioned by parents in interviews) 11. How satisfied are you with your child's achievements and/or growth while at Sapling? <p>What Needs to Be Improved</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. How satisfied are you with the learning experiences your child has at Sapling? 13. How satisfied are you with teachers' communication about your child's progress? 14. How satisfied are you with teachers' communication about classroom experiences? 15. How likely are you to recommend Sapling to a friend? 16. What area(s) do you feel is (are) the most important for Sapling to improve?

Figure 7: Data Collection Methods – Comprehensive Instruments

FINDINGS

I used the convergence approach to triangulate the results from the qualitative interviews and the quantitative surveys to develop findings. During this rigorous critical final analysis, I compared the results to arrive at trustworthy and credible findings. Following are the synthesized findings associated with each of the research questions of this study.

Research Question 1 (what the school says):
 What are stakeholders’ understandings of the purposes, goals, objectives, plans, and aspirations of the school?

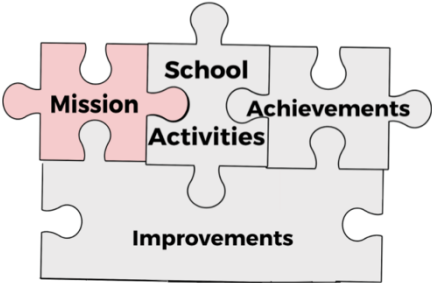


Figure 8: Research Question 1 focused on stakeholder perceptions of the school’s mission

Finding 1

Parents have a solid understanding of the school’s purpose, as stated in its mission. The school’s mission and philosophy are the primary reasons parents chose to enroll their children in the Reggio-inspired preschool. The preschool’s flexible hours were also of importance but secondary to the mission.

Results found that parents agreed very strongly with all the statements about the school’s purpose that were communicated in their mission and by their teachers and staff (see Figure 9).

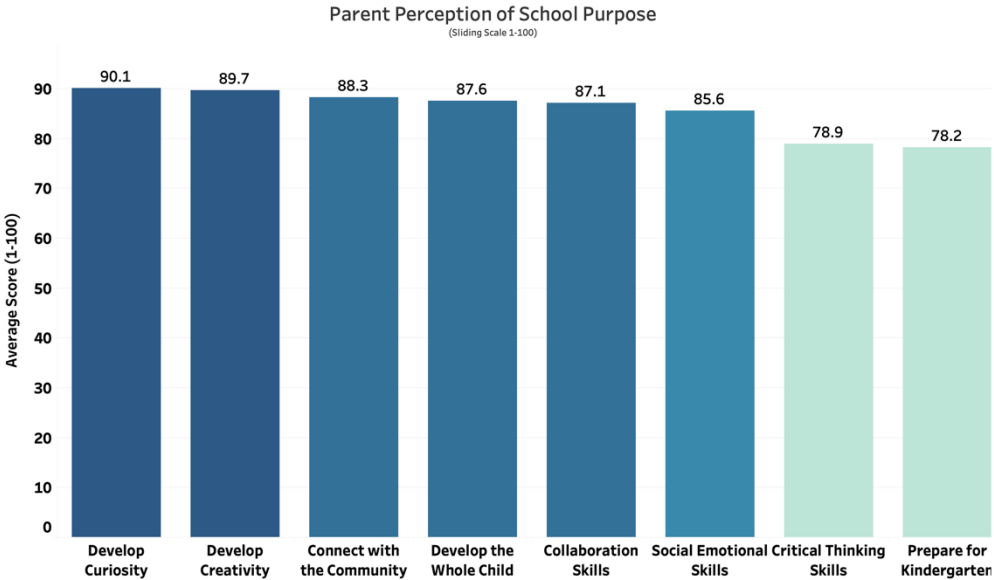


Figure 9: Parent Perception of School Purpose

Purposes with highest average scores included developing curiosity (90.1), developing creativity (89.7), and connecting with the community (88.3).

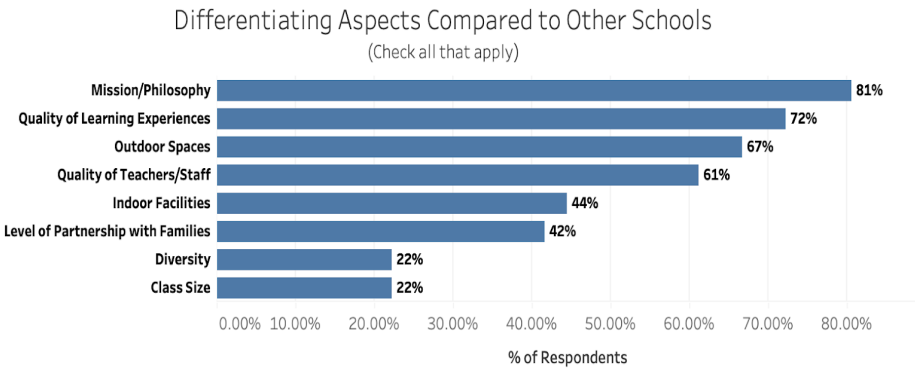


Figure 10: Differentiating Aspects Compared to Other Schools

Developing critical thinking skills (78.9) and preparing for kindergarten (78.2) were the two purposes with the lowest average scores. On average, even those purposes that received the lowest ratings on a 1-100 sliding scale still earned well over 70/100 points.

During my interviews, one parent summed up the essence of the school’s mission nicely: “The main thing that I see them do is really trying to help kids be creative and [have] positive social interactions and awareness of their role within a larger world, being good to—whether its people, the environment, animals, that type of thing.”

“

The main thing that I see them do is really trying to help kids be creative and [have] positive social interactions and awareness of their role within a larger world, being good to—whether it's people, the environment, animals, that type of thing.

PRESCHOOL PARENT

When asked what factors were most influential in differentiating the Reggio-inspired preschool from other schools, 81% of parents felt that the school’s mission/philosophy was a differentiating aspect. Other differentiating aspects included the quality of learning experiences and outdoor spaces. Factors that were less likely to be considered differentiating included diversity and class size, which were both only selected by 22% of parents (see Figure 10).

When asked to rank the factors that ultimately influenced their decision to have their child attend the preschool, 70% of parents ranked the mission/philosophy either the top factor or second most important factor (see Figure 11). Sixty percent of parents also ranked the school’s teachers/staff as one of the top two factors influencing their decision to attend. Also interesting is that close to 40% of parents felt that the school’s hours/flexibility was one of the top two factors in their selection of the school for their child. Given that many parents use preschool as daycare, the importance of hours makes sense. In my interviews, 6 out of 10 parents mentioned flexible hours as a

Factors Influencing Decision to Attend (Ranking 1-7)

	Least Important	Less Important	Slightly Important	Fairly Important	Very Important	Most Important
Mission/Philosophy	3%	4%	6%	7%	11%	44%
Teachers/Staff	2%	7%	10%	12%	9%	32%
Learning Activities	1%	3%	4%	24%	32%	19%
Hours/Flexibility	3%	10%	25%	6%	17%	27%
Facilities	1%	14%	14%	28%	14%	14%
Cost	16%	18%	18%	11%	18%	20%
Proximity to Home or Work	22%	9%	9%	7%	22%	12%

Figure 11: Factors Influencing Decision to Attend

significant deciding factor in choosing the school for their child to attend. The parents appreciated that the school was open from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., with no extra charges for children staying the full time. Parents' preference for factoring the learning environment, which is often informed by philosophy, as well as flexible hours into their preschool decision-making process is supported by the literature. Rose and Elicker (2008) studied 355 mothers of children under 6 years of age and found that warmth of the learning environment and flexibility of operating hours were among the most influential variables in parents' decisions about childcare. However, the research on how parents decide what child-care center to send their child to has also cited factors that didn't appear to have importance to the parents in this study, such as the education level of caregivers. As for additional factors that weren't all that important in parents' decision making, fewer parents ranked cost or proximity to work as factoring into their decision-making process.

In summary, the data found that parents had a solid understanding of the school's mission and considered it important in their decision to send their child to the Reggio-inspired preschool. The facility's flexible hours were also important to quite a few parents who found this to be a key selling point of the school.

Research Question 2 (what the school does): Do stakeholders feel that the activities and practices their child engages in at school facilitate their child's growth? How do stakeholders contribute to these?

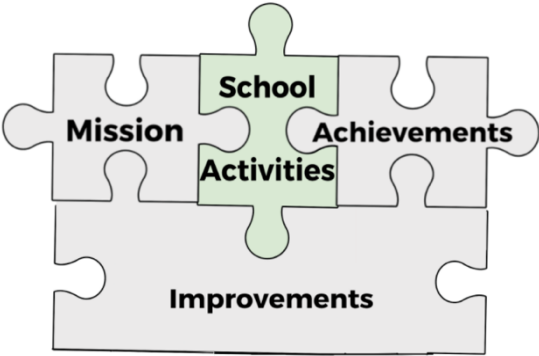


Figure 12: Research Question 2 focused on stakeholder perceptions of the school's activities

Finding 2

Parents have a thorough understanding of the activities their children are involved in at school, and they feel these activities align with the school's mission. Parents are satisfied with their opportunities to be involved with school activities, though some wish they received more guidance from the school about how to help their child at home.

In my interviews with parents, it was evident that parents had a solid understanding of the activities their child engaged in at school; when I asked the question, none of the parents showed any hesitation in the interviews. This was confirmed by the survey data which echoed similar sentiments, including consensus around which activities are staples in the children's day. For example, the top three activities reported by parents were also activities mentioned by the teachers: outdoor play (98% of parents believed this was a daily activity), walking in the community (89%), and free choice play (89%). Teachers also noted that time each day was appropriately devoted to the theme or project focus designated for the time, and 83% of parents agreed. Almost all parents (97%) reported that they primarily learned about their child's day through the photos teachers posted to the app Seesaw®, which is commonly used in early childhood and elementary settings by teachers to keep parents connected to what is happening in the classroom. In an interview, one parent noted that her child's teacher posts 40-50 times a day. Then quipped, "I will say when I first moved to [the preschool], I was a little bit like, 'The teachers are on their phones all day long, because they're posting so much,' but I have learned to appreciate the documentation of it."

Parent Perception of Their Child's Daily Activities at Preschool

- 1** OUTDOOR PLAY (98%)
- 2** WALKING IN THE COMMUNITY (89%)
- 3** FREE CHOICE PLAY (89%)

Not only were parents aware of the activities their child engaged in at school, but they also felt that those activities aligned with the school’s mission. Just 14% of parents felt this occurred moderately well, the rest (86%) felt that the alignment happened “very well” or “extremely well” (see Figure 13).

Parent Perception of Alignment Between Activities and Mission

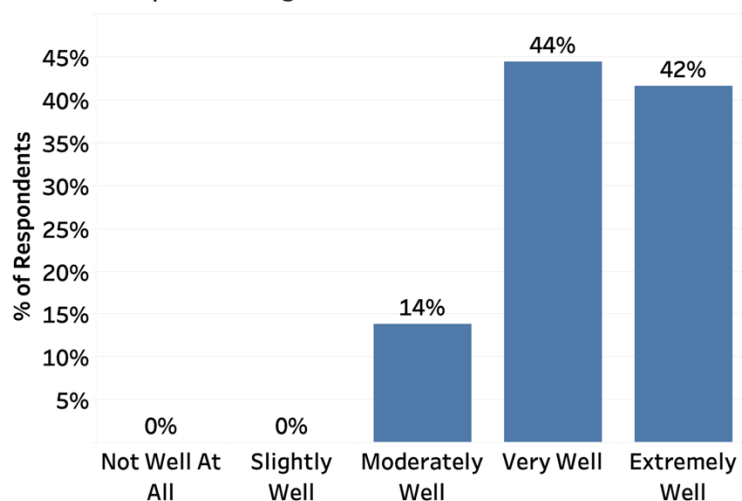


Figure 13: Parent Perception of Alignment Between Activities and Mission

In the interview, one parent noted that she saw value in all the activities the children engaged in at the preschool: “He is learning in the ways of like, how do you do a project with other people? If you’re going to work with a table of three people, what does that look like? If you need to behave appropriately in the class, even if you do sit there and know everything, how do you do that? Stuff that he’s going to need to know how to do lifelong. I view his learning as much more social, emotional growth, rather than like anything knowledge-based.” Her son had previously been in a highly academic, gifted preschool setting, but she switched him to the current preschool due to what she saw as too little emphasis on social emotional learning in the previous setting. For her, this preschool did a much better job developing children in ways of interacting, which was something she felt strongly her child needed.

Overall parents were satisfied with their opportunities to be involved in school activities, despite COVID limiting that involvement somewhat. In fact, 81% of parents were either somewhat or extremely satisfied with their contributions to the school’s activities (see Figure 14). In the interviews, many parents acknowledged that this was out of

Satisfaction with Parent Opportunities to be Involved at the School

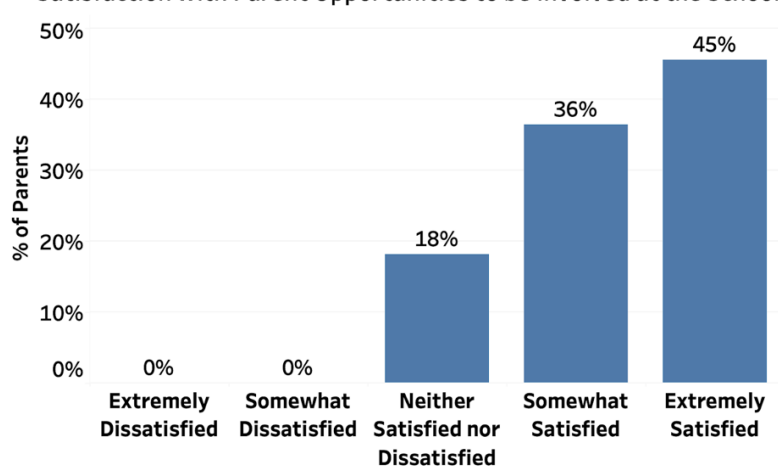


Figure 14: Satisfaction with Parent Opportunities to be Involved at the School

the school's control and that they were still happy with the school's efforts in this area by planning outdoor picnics and hosting monthly "trash pick-up" days.

The one area of parent involvement that some parents struggled with was at home. During my interviews, many parents struggled to describe how they supported their child's learning at home. Additionally, some parents stated directly that they didn't know how to help their child beyond sending them to the preschool. One parent explained, "I probably should be better at it...but I don't know how to teach, so I am really only just capable of doing what I know and what is sort of accessible online without messing her up."

Though the school could take the opinion that what parents believe and do at home isn't something the school should get involved in, the literature suggests otherwise. Studies have shown that parent beliefs about child activities at home may influence child development (Fogle & Mendez, 2006; LaForett & Mendez, 2016; Lin & Yawkey, 2014; Parker et al., 1999). One Hungarian study of preschoolers found that parental support of play-based activities at home predicts the development of executive functioning skills in children, which are important for academic success (Metaferia, Futo, Drew, & Takacs, 2020).

Research Question 3 (what the school achieves):
How do stakeholders know that goals and objectives are being achieved? What are the roles of the stakeholders in assessing the achievement of those goals?

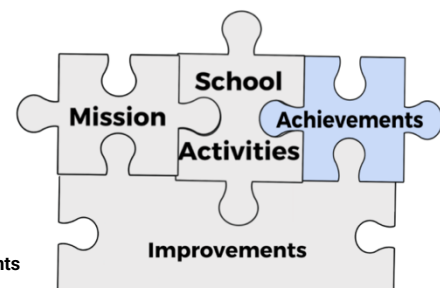


Figure 15: Research Question 3 focused on stakeholder perceptions of the school's achievements

Finding 3

Parents feel the school is highly effective at achieving its objectives. Their child coming home happy was the most important factor influencing parent perception of school effectiveness. Parents who were less likely to recommend the school to a friend (somewhat likely and least likely recommenders) seemed to prioritize other factors such as academic or social skill improvement to judge effectiveness compared to parents who were the most likely to recommend it to others.

Overall, almost all the parents (97%) were satisfied with the achievements their child made at the preschool. Additionally, when asked to rate the school’s effectiveness on a scale of 0 to 10, 72% of parents rated the school’s effectiveness eight or above (see Figure 16). Not a single parent rated the school’s effectiveness less than four. This suggests that no one believes the school is ineffective.

“
My measure is simply:
Is my daughter happy?
Do we see noticeable
growth?
PRESCHOOL PARENT

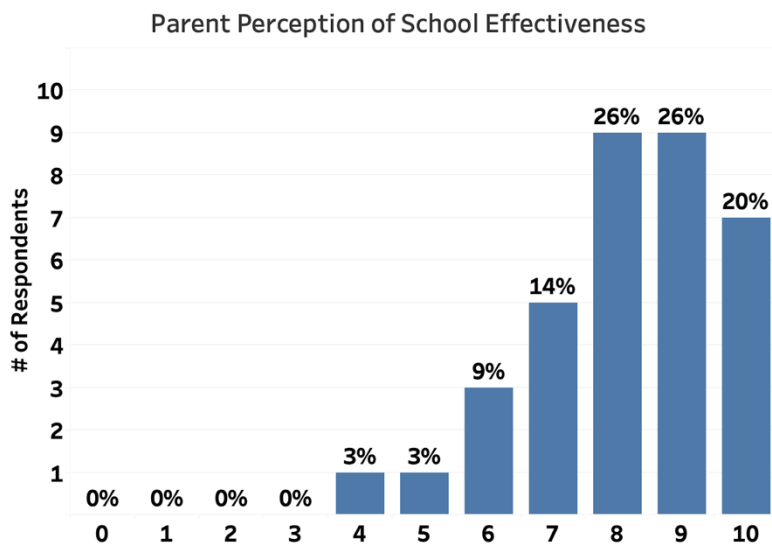


Figure 16: Parent Perception of School Effectiveness (0-10)

When asked to rank which factors were most important in determining their view of the school’s effectiveness, their child’s happiness was the most highly ranked response, followed by improvement in the child’s social skills (see Figure 17). Previous studies suggested that test scores were the primary factor influencing parent perceptions (Gibbons & Silva, 2011), so the fact that a “child’s happiness” was the over-arching effectiveness indicator for the parents in this study was an interesting finding. I found no evidence in the literature that other studies identified a child’s level of happiness to be a factor influencing parent views of school effectiveness. In addition, it was confirmed in one of my interviews, where one parent explained the way they used happiness, in addition to growth, to determine if the school is doing what it’s supposed to do: “My measure is simply, is [my daughter] happy? Do we see noticeable growth? And when I say noticeable growth, as a parent, there’s those moments where you say you see something, but then there’s those clear moments where it’s like, Holy crap, something has changed. Now, at this point our daughter’s been performing so—well, for as long as we’ve had her—we’ve never had anybody pull us aside with concerns, so happiness.”

Not surprisingly, based on their positive feelings about the school's effectiveness, parents also were very likely to recommend the preschool to a friend. Figure 18 shows parents' answers to this question, on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being "Not at all likely" and 10 being "Extremely likely." The "likelihood to recommend" the school is an important metric used by many schools to

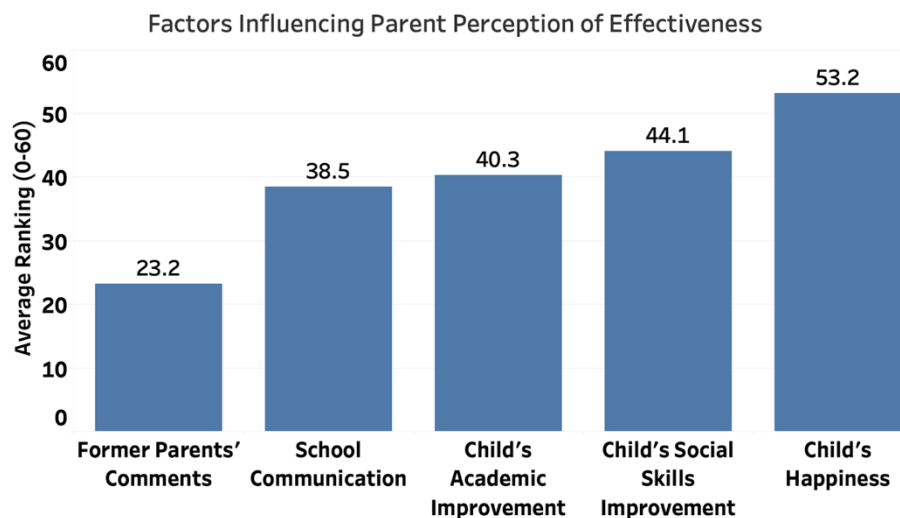


Figure 17: Factors Influencing Parent Perception of Effectiveness

assess stakeholders' overall opinion and relationship to the school (ISACS, 2020). I categorized parents into three groupings based on their answer to this question: most likely recommenders (parents who selected 9 or 10), somewhat likely recommenders (parents who selected 6, 7, or 8), and least likely recommenders (parents who selected 4 or 5). Based on these categories, I was able to analyze the data using parents' likelihood to recommend as a lens to discern what factors might be causing some parents to be more or less likely to recommend the preschool.

Specifically, I was curious whether parent likelihood to recommend the preschool to a friend might be influenced by the factors each subset of parents used to assess school effectiveness. Grouping parents based on their responses to how likely they would be to recommend the school to a friend yielded several interesting insights. For example, in my previous discussion about the factors parents ranked as influencing their effectiveness rating, the top two factors were a child's

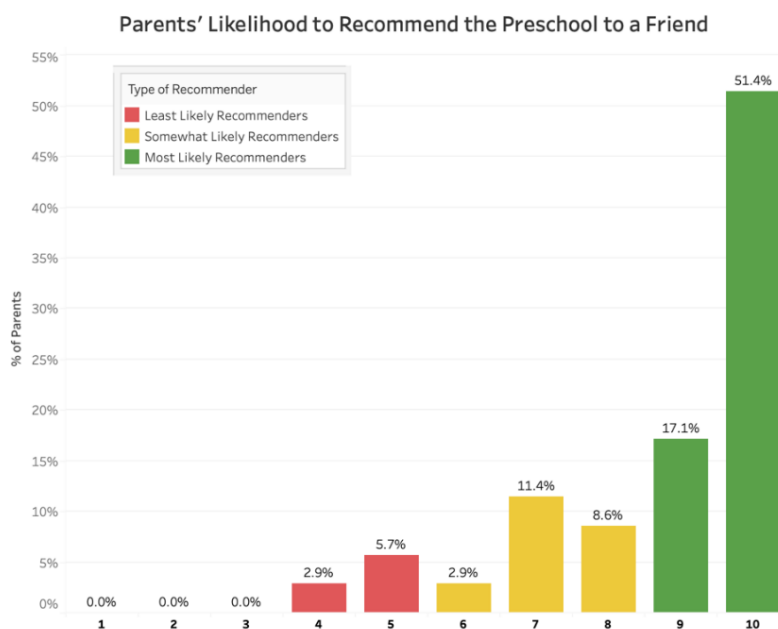


Figure 18: Parents' Likelihood to Recommend the Preschool to a Friend

happiness followed by an improvement in the child’s social skills, but when I looked at average rankings based on respondents’ likelihood to recommend the school, I found that the least likely recommenders valued some factors differently than the most likely recommenders. For example, the least likely recommenders placed much more emphasis on their child’s social and academic skill improvement when judging school effectiveness compared to the most likely recommenders (see Figure 19). In fact, the parents who were most likely to recommend the school seemed to value academic improvement much less when judging school effectiveness compared to the parents who were only somewhat or least likely to recommend it. This points to a different standard for determining a school’s effectiveness and perhaps explains, at least in part, why some parents were less likely to recommend the school to a friend than others. For these parents, one interpretation could be that since skill improvement was more important to them in determining school effectiveness, if they didn’t see clear evidence of this improvement, they might not be as comfortable recommending the school to a peer.

Another interesting finding was that the most likely recommenders were much more likely than the somewhat likely recommenders and the least likely recommenders to use school communication as a primary factor influencing their perception of effectiveness. Communication with parents by the school was found to serve as “a holistic management process (Foskett, 2002) aimed at improving effectiveness through

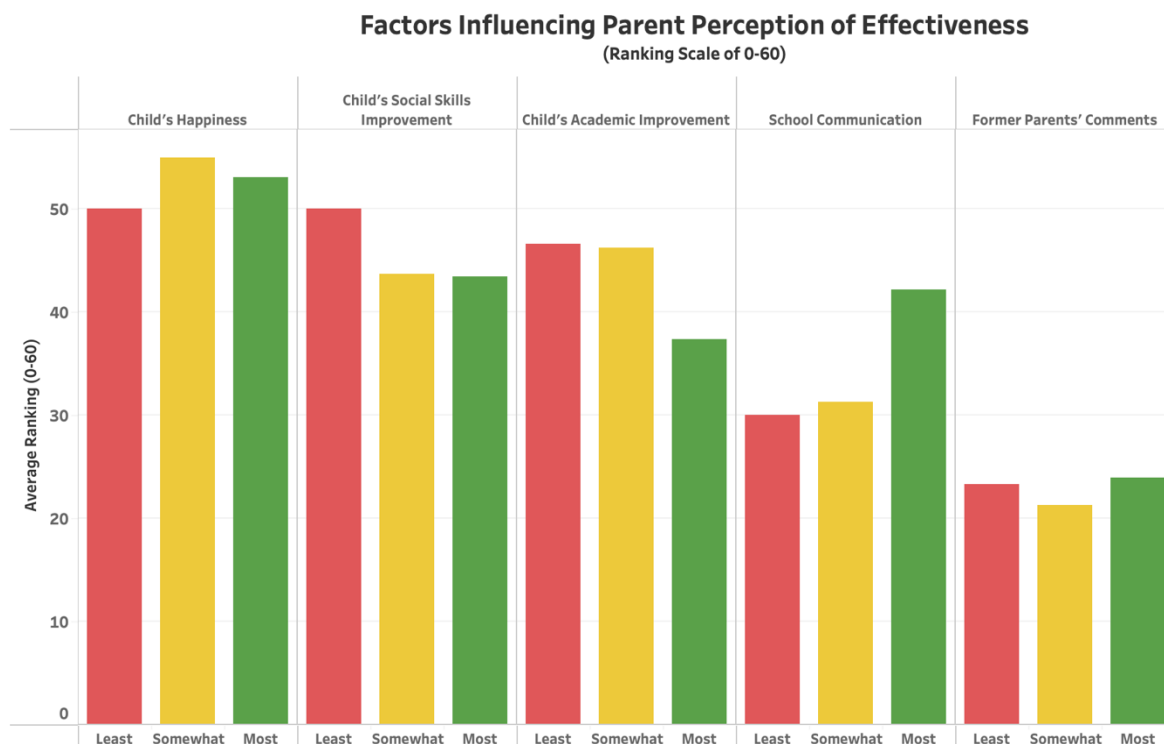


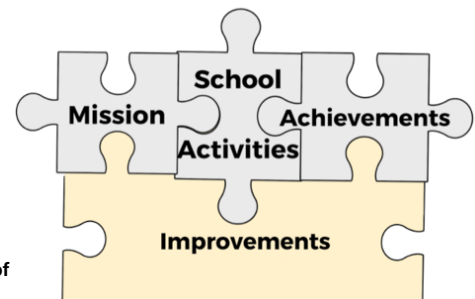
Figure 19: Factors Influencing Parent Perception of Effectiveness Based on Likelihood to Recommend the School to a Friend

the satisfaction of parents' needs and desires" (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2012). It could be that the least likely recommenders and the somewhat likely recommenders did not find their needs met by the school's communication with them. Alternatively, it's possible that the most likely recommenders placed more trust in the communication they received from the school. In several comments made by parents, both in the interviews and the survey, they reflected on their feeling that teachers at this preschool weren't as well educated or trained as teachers in other settings. This could also have impacted the way they view the usefulness of the communication coming from the teachers, so it's possible that highlighting the qualifications and expertise of teachers could help increase parent trust.

Lastly, none of the groups of parents felt that former parents' comments influenced their perception of school effectiveness very much. This was interesting considering that staff tended to cite this factor as the way they know the school is effective. As a result, it's clear that staff and parents have different ways of determining whether the school is effective at achieving its goals. For this preschool and other institutions, this is an important finding because it points to the need to study the factors stakeholder groups' feel shape their thinking about the organization since not all stakeholders use the same factors to determine success.

Research Question 4 (what the school needs to improve): What do stakeholders believe should be improved to better meet the school's purposes, goals, objectives, plans, and aspirations?

Figure 20: Research Question 4 focused on stakeholder perceptions of areas the school needed to improve



Finding 4

Parents do not believe anything should be changed regarding the school's mission or activities. However, most parents felt that communication was an opportunity for school, especially when it came to understanding their own child's progress.

To answer this question, parents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with four different functional areas: the school's mission, the learning experiences it offered, general classroom communication about daily activities, and specific child-specific communication about progress. Figure 21 compares parent satisfaction with each of these elements.

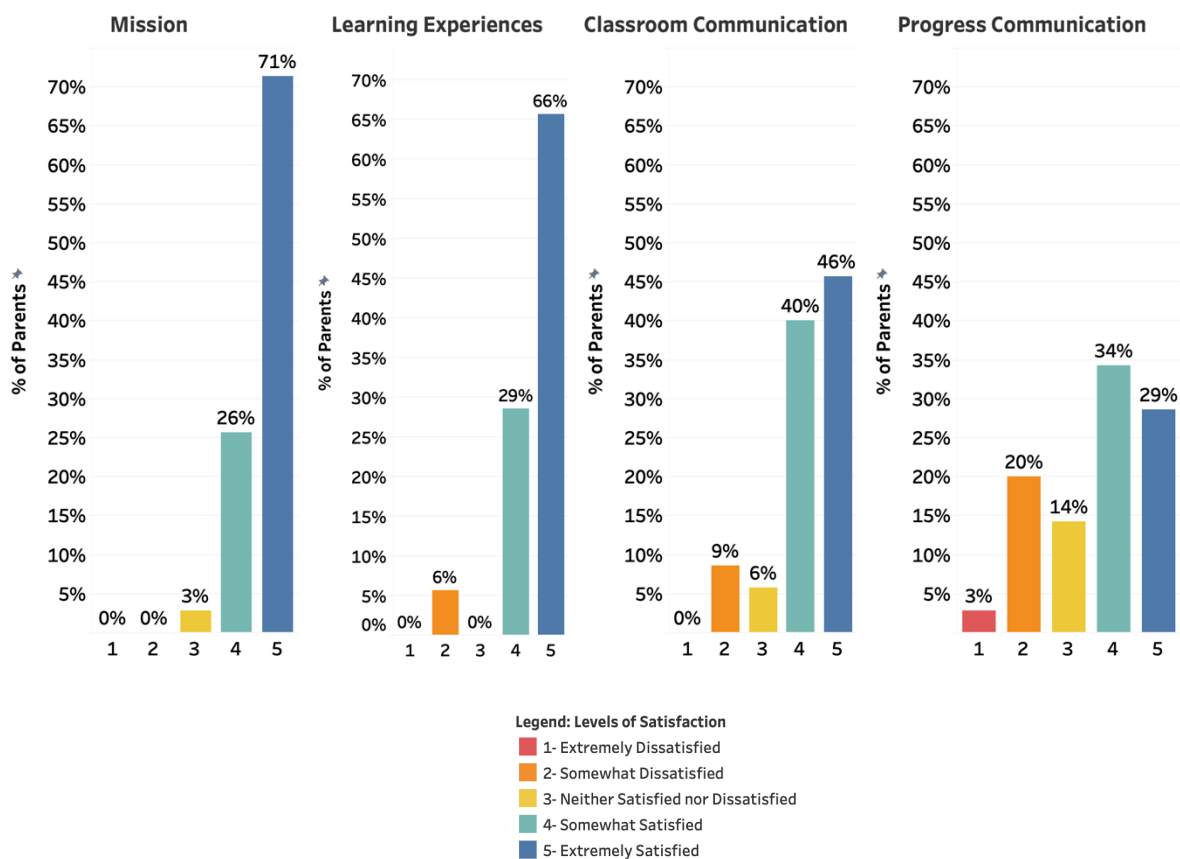


Figure 21: Parent Levels of Satisfaction with Mission, Learning Experiences, Classroom Communication, and Communication about Child's Progress

While parents are generally satisfied with the school's mission (97% reported satisfaction), learning activities (94% reported satisfaction), and classroom communication (86% reported satisfaction), there is room for improvement in terms of how the school communicates about individual children's progress (61% reported satisfaction). Though more than half of parents are still satisfied with this communication, it is significantly less than what was found in connection to the other areas and thus warrants attention. Moreover, close to a quarter of parents (24%) expressed some level of dissatisfaction with parent communication regarding their child's progress. These findings suggest an opportunity for the school to improve both the frequency and quality of communication with parents, especially when it comes to communication about their child's progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Maintain many of the preschool's current in-school activities, its flexible hours, and its focus on its mission, as parents were satisfied with these practices.

Finding 1 was that parents have a solid understanding of the school's purpose, as stated in its mission. The school's mission and philosophy are the primary reasons parents choose to enroll their child in the Reggio-inspired preschool. The preschool's flexible hours were also important to parents, but secondary to the mission. Parents are pleased with the school's mission and flexible hours, so these should be maintained and should continue to be promoted in school marketing materials to current and prospective parents.

Recommendation 2

Provide parent education on how parents can support their child's learning at home.

Finding 2 was that parents have a thorough understanding of the activities their children are involved in at school, and they feel these activities align with the school's mission. Parents are satisfied with their opportunities to be involved with school activities, though some wish they received more guidance from the school about how to help their child at home. Given the valuable role parent beliefs and assistance with activities at home can play in supporting child development, I recommend the school educate parents about the importance of their impact and offer them with some suggestions for positively supporting their child at home.

Parent education sessions, either in person or via webinar, could help do what one parent commented about as a concern: "[to] make sure that what we're doing here [at home] is similar to what they're doing at school as far as learning." Several parents echoed this sentiment and shared an uncertainty about what they should be doing with their child outside of school, which could be a beneficial topic covered in the parent education sessions. Educators could share strategies for fostering children's academic interests via the introduction of pre-literacy and pre-math concepts into daily activities (Anders et al., 2012; Gunderson & Levine, 2011). There could also be sessions on the value and mechanics of shared reading activities (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Britto, Brooks-Gunn, & Griffin, 2006; Ortiz, Stowe, & Arnold, 2001). Sessions focused on a variety of different topics could be linked by a common focus on

the nature of positive parent behaviors during at-home activities that benefit children's long-term learning attitudes and outcomes.

Recommendation 3

Showcase the value the school provides children who attend which includes both short-term and long-term benefits.

Finding 3 identified that parents feel the school is highly effective at achieving its objectives. Their child coming home happy was the most important factor influencing parent perception of school effectiveness. Parents who were less likely to recommend the school used different factors to judge effectiveness compared to parents who were most likely to recommend the preschool. Going forward, one possible opportunity for the school is to conduct a parent survey of its graduate preschoolers which would provide more insight and help to quantify the value the school provides, especially among parents who are only somewhat likely to recommend the school or who are least likely to recommend the school. Then, the preschool could share the results with current and prospective parents.

While the data shows that all groups of parents (most likely recommenders, somewhat likely recommenders, and least likely recommenders) ranked former parents' comments as least important, it's possible that this was the case, not because they didn't find this input useful, but because they simply didn't have any former parents' comments to base their determination of effectiveness upon. Given how satisfied parents seem to be with the preschool overall, there is an opportunity to share this high satisfaction rate in marketing materials to attract more prospective parents and to improve the perception of value among parents who were least likely to recommend the school. The literature supports this approach to influencing people's opinions; in fact, a neuroimaging study showed how people's response to social norms could lead them to value things differently (Zaki, Schirmer, & Mitchell, 2011).

As noted previously in Recommendation 2, parent education sessions could also be beneficial to showcase the value of the Reggio philosophy and the importance of social skill improvement within this age group and for lifelong success. Since parent involvement is a part of the Reggio philosophy, reinforcing the long-term student achievement benefits related to parent involvement, particularly when parents are more highly educated, could further enhance the value that the children receive (Tan, Lyu, & Peng, 2020). It was clear in the interviews that some parents weren't as aware of how their opinions could be harming their child, so even though these parents weren't asking for parent education sessions, they could help them better understand the education dynamics related to the preschoolers' age. For example, one parent when discussing

the preschool noted, “So here is the description that somebody gave me. They’re like, ‘Your kid will be happy at this school. Now, if you want them to go to MIT or Harvard, this is not the place. If you want them to go to regular college, this is the place.’ Kind of comparing what they would get mentally, in the academic perspective. I mean, like I said, she comes home very happy. She, I feel like, does so many neat things and stuff. It’s fun. That’s where I’ve kind of fallen—is I’m accepting that it’s just fun for her and she likes it.” This appears to be a presumptuous expectation about preschool impacting a child’s college prospects, but it does reveal the way some parents are thinking, so it might be helpful to offer parents opportunities to hear from experts of children at this age to understand what really matters for education at this level.

By offering opportunities for parents to hear from the preschool’s staff, they may be more likely to view them as qualified experts. One parent said, “In my old school, the preschool teacher, she has a master’s degree and was teaching at the local university whereas I think some of the teachers here don’t really have a formal education. I think that’s a huge difference. My old teachers, I mean, they knew how to teach preschool kids and how they learn, even like sounding out words and just different things. I don’t think it’s like that here. It’s just different.” The preschool has an opportunity to be seen as the local expert in early childhood education, especially since there are few preschools in town with the same philosophy.

Another idea would be to host quarterly in person and/or virtual parent happy hours for both current and prospective parents, which would give parents the opportunity to socialize. During these proposed events, perhaps half of the time could be spent featuring guest speakers discussing the value of Reggio practices and helping parents understand what aspects of education are most impactful for 3–5-year-olds now as well as later on when they become adults. There is significant research to suggest that, in contrast to academic skills, soft skills are key to social-emotional development and relationship-building, which can be predictors of success in life. Likewise, soft skills causally produce success and programs that enhance soft skills have an important place in a variety of educational programs (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Therefore, webinars and in-person events would give the preschool an



In my old school, the preschool teacher, she has a master's degree and was teaching at the local university whereas I think some of the teachers here don't really have a formal education. I think that's a huge difference. My old teachers, I mean, they knew how to teach preschool kids and how they learn, even like sounding out words and just different things. I don't think it's like that here. It's just different.

PRESCHOOL PARENT

opportunity to represent itself as an expert in the early childhood education field and in parent education, which could continue to enhance its local reputation.

Recommendation 4

Provide more clear and consistent feedback about each child’s learning, as well as how parents might be able to foster growth at home.

Finding 4 indicated that, when asked what they felt could be improved, the majority of parents felt there was no need to change the school’s mission or activities. The most common piece of feedback shared by the parents, both in the interviews and in the survey, was that the school should provide more information about their child’s progress. Consistent and targeted communication about their child was something they felt could make their experience at the school even better.

When it came to communication about his child’s progress, one parent noted, “I would feel better if there was more formality, it didn’t have to be over the top. But just some form of, we’re human beings, we love being graded, I know that. But it’s not even reports based on a particular measurement, even simply anecdotal discussion about what they see, especially a child, I have learned very much that your child can behave differently when they’re not around their parents. So, their window into her world can be slightly different than mine.” Often, parents also mentioned that the only time they

received feedback on their child, specifically, was when they reached out with a question or concern, and some of them felt badly reaching out given how busy they observed the teachers were.



I would feel better if there was more formality, it didn't have to be over the top. But just some form of, we're human beings, we love being graded, I know that. But it's not even reports based on a particular measurement, even simply anecdotal discussion about what they see, especially a child, I have learned very much your child can behave differently when they're not around their parents. So their window into her world can be slightly different than mine.

PRESCHOOL PARENT

Providing more clear and consistent feedback would benefit parents overall and could influence the views of parents who were least likely to recommend the school to others. For these parents, academic improvement was more important when determining school effectiveness than for any other group, so, if they didn’t see clear evidence of this

improvement, they might be more likely to share a negative experience with peers. It's possible that these parents could have been more satisfied if they were provided with clearer measures of their child's academic progress.

This desire from parents to hear more about their child and how they can help them has been empirically established. Sonnenschein, Stites, and Dowling's (2020) study of 126 preschool parents found that a majority (61%) wanted more information about their child's progress and how they could help their child at home. The importance of parents' role in supporting young children's early education is well documented (Sonnenschein & Dowling, 2019), and research has also shown that if parents feel they don't have the skills or knowledge to help their children, they are less likely to take steps to foster the kinds of learning experiences children would benefit from at home (Hoover Dempsey et al., 2005). Moreover, as noted previously in the Review of the Literature, communication in the form of pedagogical documentation shared with parents is valuable in helping parents feel satisfied with their decision to send their child to a Reggio-inspired school (Harris, 2019; MacDonald, 2007).

“ I think what's missing, I guess, is I don't know what their goals are for my child. I might have my own goals for them, but I'm not sure if they have goals for my child. ”

PRESCHOOL PARENT

There are a few different ways the school could improve its pedagogical documentation practices and communicate with parents about their children's progress. The most preferred method by parents, as rated in the survey, was written comments or narrative observations by the teachers. The next preferred method was formal conversations with the teacher. Lastly, parents on average rated an exhibition or fair as their last choice (see Figure 22). This finding was interesting considering that most communication in Reggio settings tends to happen via documentation panels hung on the walls of the classroom, so observing these would be like an exhibition, though perhaps less formal. COVID-19 has complicated the parents' ability to visit classrooms and so this could also be a reason the exhibition or

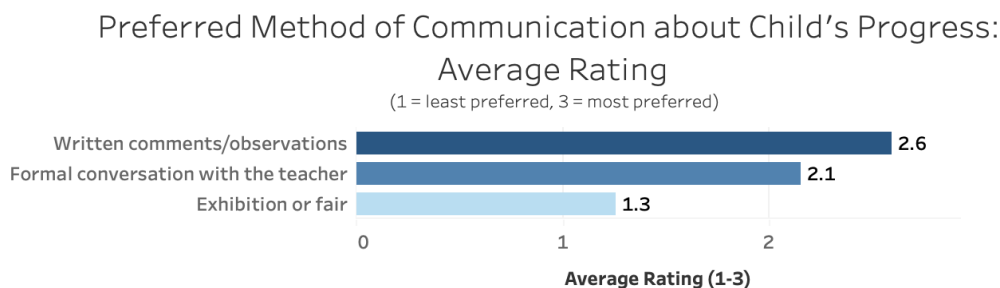


Figure 22: Average Rating of Preferred Methods of Communication About Child's Progress

fair's option wasn't more popular. If the school opts for providing parents with written comments or observations, one opportunity would be to use Seesaw®, which parents are already checking daily for general photos of classroom activities; this could be a meaningful and engaging way to post children's work, thinking, and/or progress.

Perhaps teachers could have a goal to post for each child on their personal Seesaw® portfolio once per week, with a photo of the child engaged in an activity along with a brief 2-3 sentence narrative of the teacher, for instance: 1) describing the activity, 2) highlighting for parents what in that activity the child excelled at, and 3) sharing what next steps might be for the child to grow within that activity. An example of one possible approach to this form of documentation is shown in Figure 23, the way it would appear on the Seesaw® app. In this scenario, only the child in the picture, family members would be able to see that post.

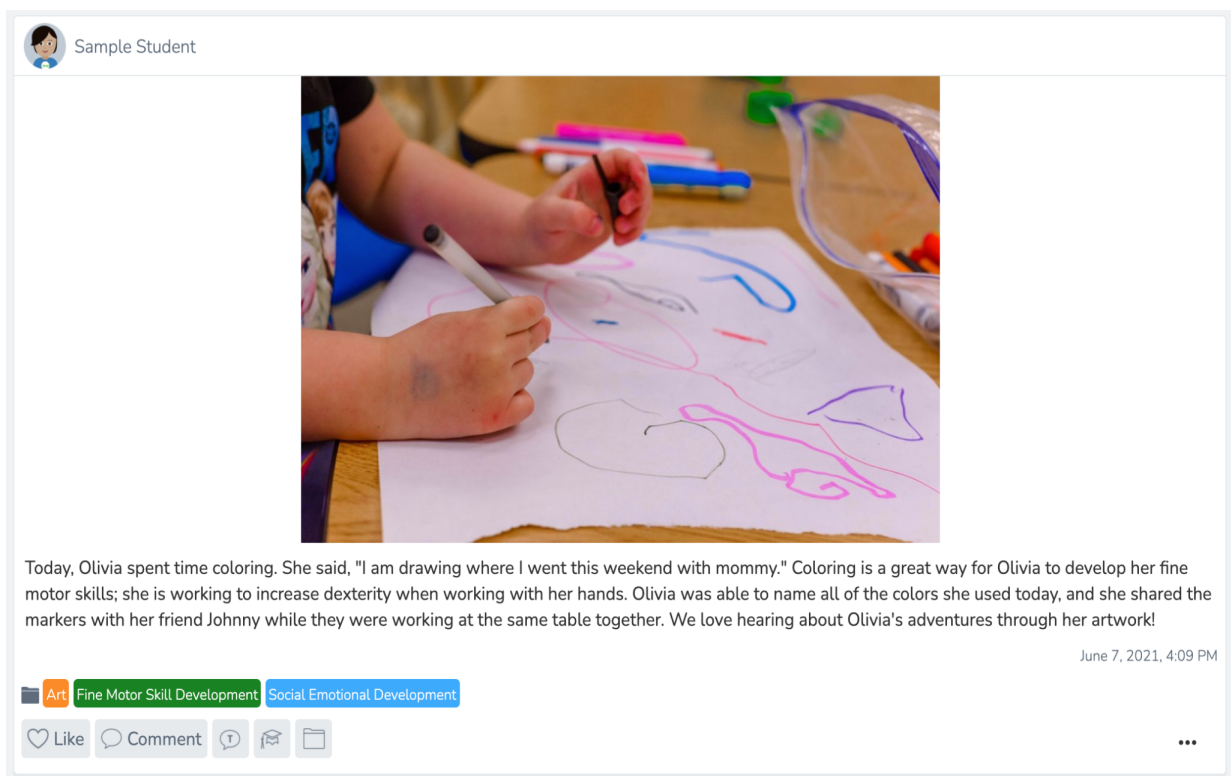


Figure 23: Sample Seesaw® Individual Child's Progress Documentation Post

The benefit of this approach to sharing feedback with parents is that it aligns with the Reggio philosophy of letting the child lead with their forms of self-expression, as opposed to imposing a standardized checklist or pre-set goals on the child's learning the way more traditional preschool programs sometimes do (Rinaldi, 2004). Nevertheless, the findings of this study demonstrate that some parents do seem to

want more structure in how they receive communication; or at the very least, they want progress information specific to their own child. One parent in the interview shared that she felt the teachers knew her child but that “I think what’s missing, I guess, is I don’t know what their goals are for my child. I might have my own goals for them, but I’m not sure if they have goals for my child.” By posting brief updates on an individual child’s activities and progress via Seesaw®, the school meets the needs of parents who want more formalized goals and communications, without compromising their philosophy and mission, which would not support a standard report card method as a means of communicating progress.

Regardless of what approach the school selects, this goal of aligning parent communications with common Reggio methods is important given how much value parents place on this aspect of the school’s mission/philosophy. Seesaw® appears to be the most seamless way to transition to a more consistent, customizable, and engaging form of feedback regarding a child’s progress, given that teachers and parents are already familiar with the platform. Hertzog (2001) reports she observed in her research visits to Reggio Emilia schools in Italy: “Each documentation board has photographs of children working, samples of children’s products, and text describing some aspect of what the children are doing” (p. 6). Due to technology, specifically the Seesaw® app, this can effectively be accomplished through the practices that teachers and parents are already engaged in.

DISCUSSION and LIMITATIONS

As mentioned in the introduction, asking questions is not about finding a single answer, but rather about “requesting the courage to find a collection of possible answers,” according to the president of the Reggio Children Foundation, which inspired the establishment of the preschool which is the focal organization in this study (Rinaldi, 2004). The intention for this research was to uncover research findings that would provide the Reggio-inspired preschool administration with data that could give them knowledge of how well the school is achieving its mission, as well as several recommendations that could be translated into possible opportunities for the preschool to continue to move forward with confidence from a formal evaluation, as opposed to through only assumptions.

The purpose of this study was to help a Reggio-inspired preschool understand the extent to which stakeholders believe its mission, activities, and achievements are aligned, and to determine if there were any gaps between mission and practice that would be identified as areas in need of improvement. A mixed-methods research approach found that, overall, parents have a solid understanding of the school’s purpose, as stated in its mission and that they feel the activities their child is involved in at school aligns with the mission.

There were several limitations regarding the research project. First, interviews with parents were only conducted with those who signed up. Therefore, there was a self-selection bias regarding the parents who volunteered to participate within the interview process. Similarly, the quantitative survey, only collected usable data from 34 participants. Furthermore, since not all parents responded to the survey, especially since this was a relatively small sample, there is likely a significant self-selection bias. Moreover, I did not collect any demographic information from parents. This choice was made to ensure confidentiality of participants, especially given the small population size of this preschool. However, this meant that data could not be analyzed based on several factors that other studies have typically considered such as years at the school, age of child, parent education level, race, etc., which could have provided additional descriptive statistics, as well as identified any relationships between specific concepts and different stakeholders' descriptors through quantitative measures.

Another limitation was the decision to apply a descriptive analysis to collected data. The determination to use descriptive analyses, as opposed to inferential statistical analysis, was based on the need for the preschool's administrator and faculty members to have more practical and actionable results. In addition, the small sample size may have skewed results especially since some of the assumptions related to more rigorous statistical analysis would not have been met. Consequently, limiting the analysis to descriptive analysis, avoided any statistical testing significance errors that could have impacted the integrity, reliability, and validity of the mixed methods results.

Despite these limitations, the data identified several important findings that will likely be useful to the preschool realizing its Reggio-inspired mission. Although parents appreciated the flexible hours, the Reggio-inspired mission was the primary reason parents decided to enroll their children at the preschool. In addition, the research found that parents thought the activities their children engaged in at school aligned with the school's mission. As a result, the project findings conclude that there aren't any gaps between mission and practice. Correspondingly, as it relates to the preschool's institutional functions, the findings indicated that parents have a thorough understanding of the activities their children are involved in at the preschool because of the Seesaw® app, but some of them wish they had more help determining how to assist their child at home. Regarding school achievement, parents stated that the school is highly effective at achieving its objectives. Overall, whether a child returned home from preschool happy was the most important factor influencing parent perception of school effectiveness. Interestingly, parents who were most likely to recommend the school valued academic improvement much less when determining effectiveness compared to parents who were only somewhat or least likely to recommend it, which points to different standards for judging school effectiveness among different subsets of parents. Finally, as for what needs to be improved, parents indicated that no changes

were necessary regarding the preschool's Reggio-inspired mission and practices, along with its aligned activities. However, most parents identified communication as being the preschool's weakest area of operations, especially when it came to understanding their own child's progress.

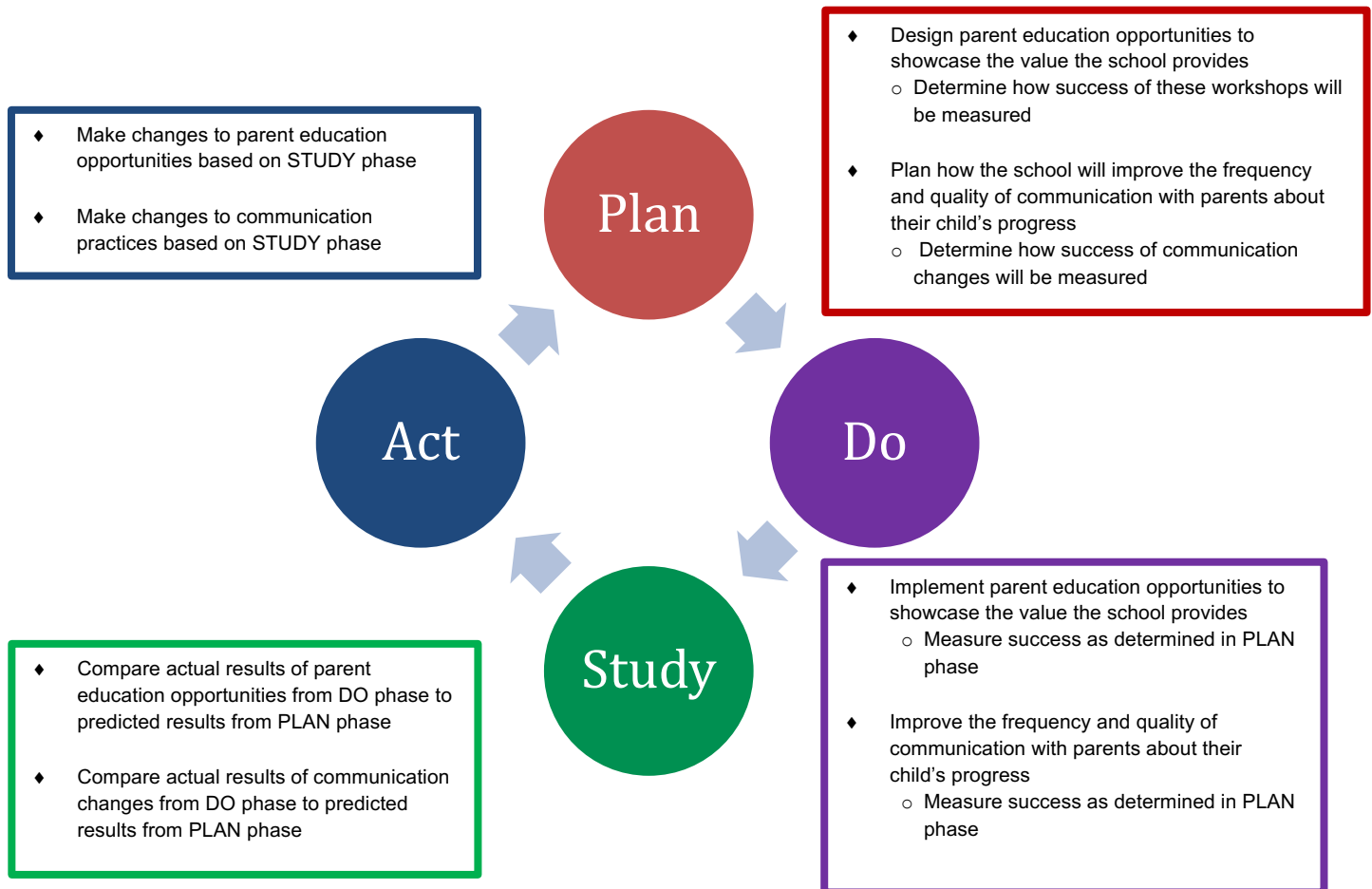
Four key recommendations emerge from this project's findings. First, the school should maintain many of its current practices and activities, its flexible hours, and its focus on its Reggio-inspired mission, as parents were quite satisfied with these areas. Second, the preschool should consider offering parent education session in which strategies are suggested for how parents can support their child's learning at home. Third, the preschool should promote the variety of short-term and long-term benefits for children who attend their Reggio-inspired preschool to both prospective and current parents. Fourth, the most important recommendation related to the findings identified was that parents felt they deserved more clear and consistent feedback about their child's learning and growth. Based on the qualitative interview findings, the survey collected data regarding the preference of the type of format for communication feedback, and the findings indicated that most parents preferred written comments or observations. In the recommendation final analysis, three out of four of the recommendations were communication based. Therefore, to summarize, the preschool should focus on further developing and engaging in communications with all its stakeholders, including current and potential parents.

CONCLUSION

Overall, project findings concluded that parents at the preschool were very satisfied and happy with the Reggio-inspired preschool. By maintaining the school's primary institutional functions, offering parent education opportunities to support learning at home, incorporating more communicative opportunities for parents to understand the preschool's approach that would likewise highlight the school's achievements, and improving communication with parents about their child's progress, it is likely the school will experience continued success.

In addition to these four primary mission-practice related recommendations, the school should also consider following an evaluative improvement cycle that could be supported by regular feedback from its stakeholders as it continues to grow. For example, a plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle would allow the school to implement small changes such as the recommendations discussed in this study and then monitor them to determine success or a need for improvement. A PDSA cycle begins with "planning" to describe the changes that will occur and defines how success will be determined. This is followed by a "do" phase, which involves making the proposed change(s) and recording the results. Then, a "study" phase allows leaders compare what happened to what was supposed to happen, and finally an "act" phase which follows up by deciding

what to do next (Bryk et al., 2015). The following chart shows what this cycle could look like based on the recommendations offered within this study.



To support the PDSA cycle, the preschool should incorporate opportunities to solicit stakeholder feedback. This practice will help the school continue to further develop in ways that are best suited for the needs of its stakeholders, as well as allow for an early pivot if the practices start to mis-align with its mission and parent expectations. At the very least, conducting annual parent surveys to understand what areas they are satisfied with and what areas warrant improvement will continue to help the school identify whether its activities continue to align with its mission. Annual surveys also give stakeholders the opportunity to feel heard about topics that matter to them, and as Knopf and Swick (2007) point out, “parents often just need someone to listen to and then clarify their concerns.” Actively seeking out parent input can help the school position itself as receptive to the needs of families in its care.

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APPENDIX A

Staff Interview Guide

What the School Says

1. What would you say the school's purpose is? Why does the school exist?
2. What makes your educational approach different from other schools in the area?
3. How would you describe the school's mission to a prospective parent?
4. Can you tell me a bit about the school's plans for the future or long-term vision?

What the School Does

5. Tell me about a typical day at this school.
6. What kinds of activities do the kids engage with?
7. What is your role in planning or implementing these as the teacher or administrator?
8. How do you identify and target student learning needs through learning experiences?
9. How do you communicate with parents about the activities and learning experiences their children engage in?

What the School Achieves

10. How do you know that the school is successful in achieving its goals?
11. What is your role in assessing student outcomes?
12. How do you determine which outcomes to assess based on the school's goals and the methods of assessment?
13. What role (if any) do parents play in assessment?
14. How well do you feel the school uses its resources to achieve its goals?

What Needs to Be Improved

15. What, if anything, do you wish were different about the school's mission, goals, or long-term plans?
16. What activities, if any, do you feel should be a part of a student's day at school but aren't now (or are, but shouldn't be)?
17. What, if anything, do you wish were different about the school's communication (frequency or quality) with parents?
18. What, if anything, do you wish were different about your role as a teacher at this school?
19. Is there anything else you would change about the school?

APPENDIX B

Parent Interview Guide

What the School Says

1. What would you say the school's purpose is?
2. What makes the school's educational approach different from other schools in the area?
3. How would you describe the school's mission to a friend who might be considering the school?

What the School Does

4. Tell me about a typical day for your child at this school.
5. How do you hear about their day?
6. What kinds of activities do you think your child engages in at school that facilitate their growth?
7. What is your role in facilitating your child's growth? (e.g., Do you extend learning opportunities at home and if so, how do you do that?)

What the School Achieves

8. How do you know that the school is successful in achieving its goals?
9. How would you describe your role in determining your child's progress?
10. Is there an opportunity for you to share with teachers about your experiences with your child at home? Tell me about that.

What Needs to Be Improved

11. What, if anything, do you wish were different about the school's mission or goals?
12. What activities, if any, do you feel should be a part of your child's day at school but aren't now (or are, but shouldn't be)?
13. What, if anything, do you wish were different about the school's communication (frequency or quality) with you about your child or their activities?
14. Are you satisfied with your level of involvement at the school? Why or why not?
15. Is there anything else you would change about the school?

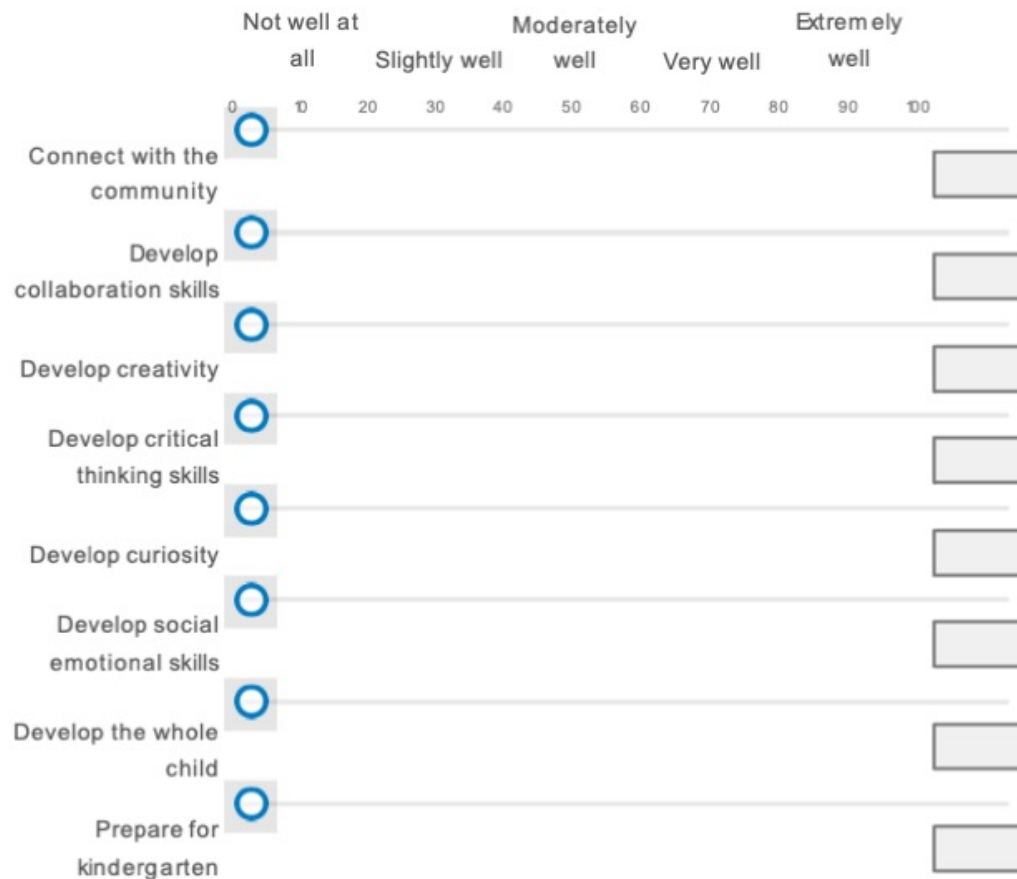
APPENDIX C

Parent Survey (Administered Online Via Qualtrics)



Part 1: Mission & Purpose

How well does each of the following describe Sapling's purpose?



What differentiates Sapling from other schools in the area? (Check all that apply)

- Class size
- Diversity of students and/or staff
- Indoor facilities
- Level of partnership with families
- Mission/Philosophy
- Outdoor spaces
- Quality of learning experiences
- Quality of teachers/staff
- Other

Rank order the importance of each of the following in influencing your decision to send your child to Sapling. (Drag and drop)

Cost
Facilities
Hours/Flexibility
Learning Activities
Mission/Philosophy
Proximity to Home or Work
Teachers/Staff
Other <input type="text"/>

Part 2: Institutional Functions

Which of the following activities do you think are part of a typical day for your child at school? (Check all that apply)

- Activities related to the current project/theme
- Art
- Free Choice Play
- Literacy (letters/sounds)
- Morning Meeting
- Numeracy (numbers/counting)
- Outdoor Play
- Read-Aloud
- Sensory Table Time
- Small group learning
- Spanish
- Walking in the community
- Other

How do you typically hear about your child's day? (Check all that apply)

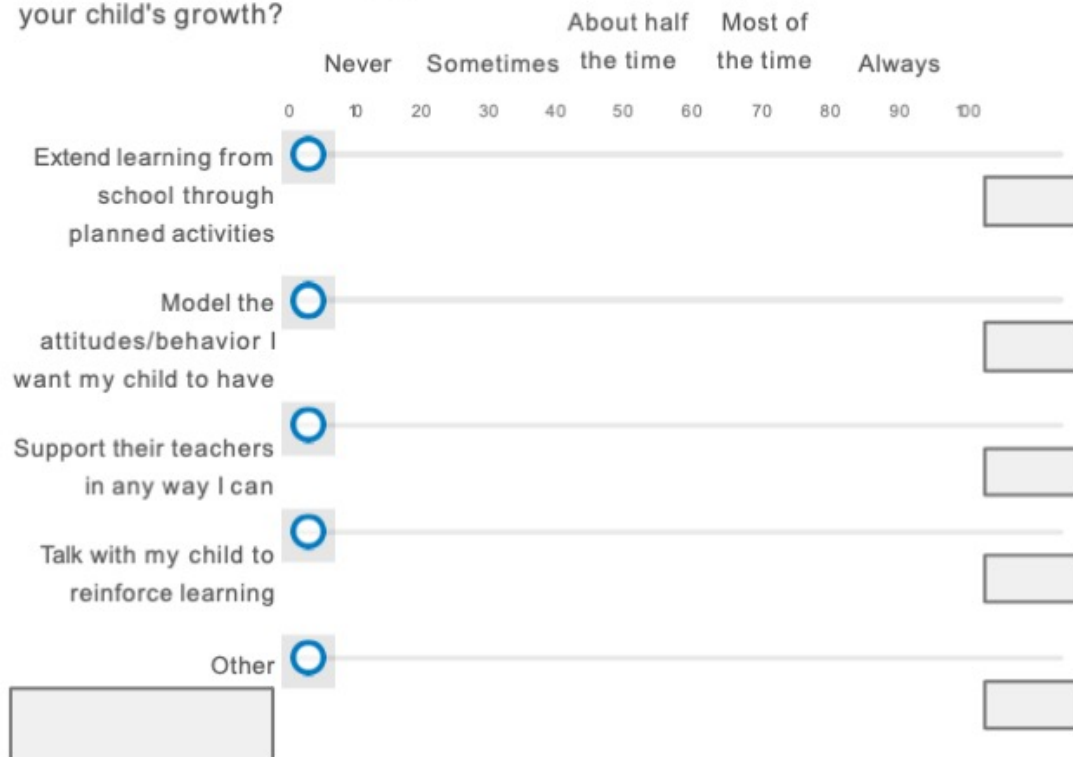
- Conversations with staff at pick-up/drop-off
- Papers brought home
- Photos posted to Seesaw
- Written communication from the teacher
- Your child
- Other

To what extent do you feel the experiences provided to your child at Sapling reflect the school's mission?

The mission of Sapling is to honor children by providing them a warm, openhearted school environment with intentional, nurturing educators that deliver the highest quality of early childhood education and foster whole child development. Our goal is to empower children to discover themselves and the world around them, as they become critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and collaborative community members. We aim to inspire children to lead mindful, peaceful, and purposeful lives.

- Extremely well
- Very well
- Moderately well
- Slightly well
- Not well at all

To what extent do **you** engage in each of the following activities to facilitate your child's growth?





How satisfied are you with the opportunities you are given to be involved as a parent at Sapling?

- Extremely satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

Part 3: Institutional Effectiveness

Overall, how effective do you feel the school is in achieving its goals?

Completely Ineffective Extremely Effective

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Rank the importance of each of the following in helping you determine whether the school is successful in achieving its goals. (Drag and drop)

What I hear from current or former parents about Sapling's influence on their child
What I see in communication from the school (written and/or photos)
Whether my child is happy
Whether my child shows improved academic skills
Whether my child shows improved social-emotional skills
Other <input type="text"/>

How satisfied are you with **your child's achievements and/or growth** while at Sapling?

- Extremely satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

Part 4: Opportunities for Improvement

How satisfied are you with the school's **mission or goals**?

- Extremely satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

How satisfied are you with the **learning experiences/activities** your child engages in at Sapling?

- Extremely satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

How satisfied are you with teachers' **communication about your child's progress**?

- Extremely satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

Rank the following methods in terms of your preference (if given a choice) for learning about your child's progress.

Formal conversation with the teacher (face-to-face or virtual conference)

Written comments/observations provided by the teacher about my child

Exhibition or fair showcasing the work of the children

How satisfied are you with teachers' **communication about classroom experiences**?

- Extremely satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

How likely are you to recommend Sapling to a friend?

Not at all likely

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Extremely likely

What area(s) do you feel is (are) the most important for Sapling to improve?

Powered by Qualtrics