Analysis of the state of technological integration at the Woodview Terrace Montessori school

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ICT 733 Technology Adoption and Implications

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**Abstract**

Childcare is a growing need, amidst a growing population, and technology is playing an increasingly crucial role in how the administrative and educational challenges are resolved in the daycare and early childhood service industries. This sector provides a crucial service to the economy, and greatly contributes to the personal development of future generations. But with more parents at work than in previous generations, we’re reaching a tipping point where the lack of adequate daycare availability is depressing the trend, driving some parents to make difficult financial decisions and stay at home (Schochet, 2019).

There has been insufficient research and attention paid to the smaller facilities, often family owned and operated, with a loyal customer base, and still having to abide by local and state regulations, and keep up to date with rapidly changing technology, while being invaluable to communities in desperate need of their service. In this study, we examine how one local daycare center operates, dive into the technical needs and challenges they face, and discuss what works well. Woodview Terrace Montessori is located in Woodbury, Minnesota, and has about 45-50 students on average. Extensive interviews were conducted with critical staff members, including those in management, and the findings and analysis are presented here.

**Background**

Founded in 1978 by Mary Szlaius, Woodview Terrace Montessori is a childcare center providing care and teaching for children from six months to six years old (“Our Story…”, 2012). Family owned throughout its history, the center tries to set itself apart from the average daycare facility in a number of ways. Meal plans are created with the help of parents, identifying nutritional needs and dietary restrictions, and meals and snacks are all prepared fresh in house, using local sourcing and vendors to ensure quality. Daily lesson plans are customized to individual children’s interests, and activities are unique, incorporating concerns for social, emotional, physical, and cognitive aspects of childhood development. Woodview terrace also prioritizes exposure to multicultural lessons and activities, to provide children with a more inclusive learning experience.

Montessori schools are unique, giving children a more autonomous, self-led style of learning. They focus on building confidence through activities and social connections, to stimulate children to think and act for themselves, and develop an affinity for learning (Meinke, 2019). Given all of these factors, however, there are some limitations to what the center can provide. Field trips are infrequent, and typically restricted to hyper-local areas like neighborhood parks. Due to the majority of resources going into student development, technology concerns are often set aside to prioritize other needs. Requests can be made for new technology or other upgrades but are typically only met on a case-by-case basis, and as available funding provides.

Figure Woodview Terrace Montessori Organizational Structure

**Employee roles and job descriptions**

The manager’s role encompasses the entire organization. She gives tours of the facilities to prospective parents, manages payroll, plans menus, approves all lesson plans from every teacher, and ensures that each teacher is performing according to the center’s standards. She also does hands-on work, giving teachers breaks and substitutes in for any class where needed (even does the cooking on occasion). The role also requires doing all the scheduling for teachers and aides, and scheduling service for maintenance and cleaning, while also making sure the proper supplies are stocked and classrooms are prepared accordingly. One of the more important aspects of this role is guaranteeing the center is up to code with state licensing and meeting NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) guidelines – NAEYC is an accreditation association for childcare providers and organizations (Willer).

There are four full-time teachers on staff at Woodview Terrace. Each one is dedicated to a specific age group, with their own classroom. Infants, from 4-18 months, are provided with essential care (diapering, cleaning, feeding), and their teacher creates specialized lessons and activities based around a monthly theme. The infants’ teacher also works directly with parents to ensure their child’s successful transition to higher age classrooms.

A dedicated teacher for toddlers (18 months to around 3 years) gives her children more sophisticated training around critical skills like potty training, sleep training, using utensils and finer motor skills, and helping children become more vocal about their wants and needs.

Two teachers oversee the next age group – preschoolers (3-6 years). One leads a class for the creative side of learning, allowing students to make arts and crafts, using recycled materials to create festive projects, exploring sensory and language aptitudes. The other teacher focuses on the ‘school’ side (more of a focus on the Montessori methodologies), teaching STEM subjects like science and basic mathematics, and also teaching more nuanced language skills. This role requires standards more aligned with a traditional classroom teaching environment.

Two additional teachers are available to fill in as needed and are qualified to substitute in any age group, with any activities. They can also help the manager with tasks like laundry, restocking, and cleaning. There are also three teacher’s aides (one for each age group) who help lead activities planned by the teachers, and otherwise give basic classroom assistance where needed, including scheduling and classroom accountability.

Lastly (but not least, certainly) is the role of chef. This person must have prior experience at another school, and an ability to create healthy meals that meet both the dietary restrictions and nutritional guidelines set by the state. They create individual meals for each child based on needs previously discussed with the parents. Everything they make must be prepared the day of, to ensure quality and safety.

**Owner**: Catherine McDonnell

**Director**: Kacy Brito

**Chef**:

Jessia J.

**Substitute teachers**:

Kelsie U., Natasha L.

**Infant’s teacher**:

Raquel M.

**Toddler’s teacher**:

Brittany S.

**Preschool teachers**:

Susan A. (Creative), Liz S. (Montessori)

**Infant’s aide**:

Seraphina T.

**Toddler’s aide**:

Nikki B.

**Preschool aide**:

Alyssa M.

Figure Woodview Terrace Montessori staff organization

**Essential technologies used**

State regulations require childcare facilities to have efficient lighting. The purpose of this is safeguard a child’s health especially during scheduled sleep times. For example, the room where cribs for infants are located must be lit in such a way that a teacher can ensure at all times that all children are breathing properly and positioned safely (Revisor of Statutes, State of Minnesota, 2017). Because infants need a darker room to sleep, LED nightlights are used both in the crib room as well as other parts of the building.

Small sound machines are also used in the infants’ crib room, which produce either white noise to help calm and lull the babies to sleep or classical music, the latter being preferred by the manager. A CD player is used in the main room, and the teacher can curate playlists for both teachers and students for entertainment and relaxation purposes. In the preschool classroom, a teacher uses her cellphone to play music for students to sing along to foreign language songs.

The two main entrance doors are always locked, and are able to be unlocked via a keypad, with a code that is given to both teachers and parents. The digital lock can be nullified by using a key, which physically keeps the door locked no matter what code is entered.

Parents use a Windows PC upon arrival to sign their children in and out of the facility, using a unique identifier code. Employees also use the PC to clock in and out of their shifts. If the PC goes down (which it does) a physical sign in/out sheet is used. All times are recorded and sent to the manager’s computer, where she uses the data for billing and payroll. Another, smaller, PC is used by the preschool students to play numbers games and create digital art.

Other technology plays a role, like the iPad teachers use to take photos or play music with, which is passed from one class to another on a regular schedule (restrictions prohibit teachers from using their personal cellphones to take pictures involving students). A state-of-the-art sanitization machine is used to clean dishes, toys, bottles, and cookware to prevent germs and cross-infection. Bottle warmers are used in the infant classrooms to bring breastmilk up to a temperature that makes it safe for the babies to drink.

Lastly, the website (wtmchildcare.com) contains contact, location, mission and philosophy statements and service listings. It’s a simple site with few or no interactive elements, serving mostly as a static informational tool. It is infrequently updated.

**Research and methodologies**

**Organizational environment and ecosystem**

The need for daycare, and childcare services in the United States has increased for decades, and the number of facilities has grown, but still hasn’t met demand (Biery, 2014). It was projected in the last decade that the “social assistance” and healthcare sectors would be the driving factors behind the increases in employment (Henderson, 2012). Wages, however, tend to be low, because of restrictions on child-to-teacher ratios that requires higher staffing levels, and have greater regulatory demands that need to be accounted for (Orenstein, 2018). This can mean budgets – especially at a smaller, family-run operation like Woodview Terrace – are tight, and room for technological improvements are minimal, despite positive growth in the industry.

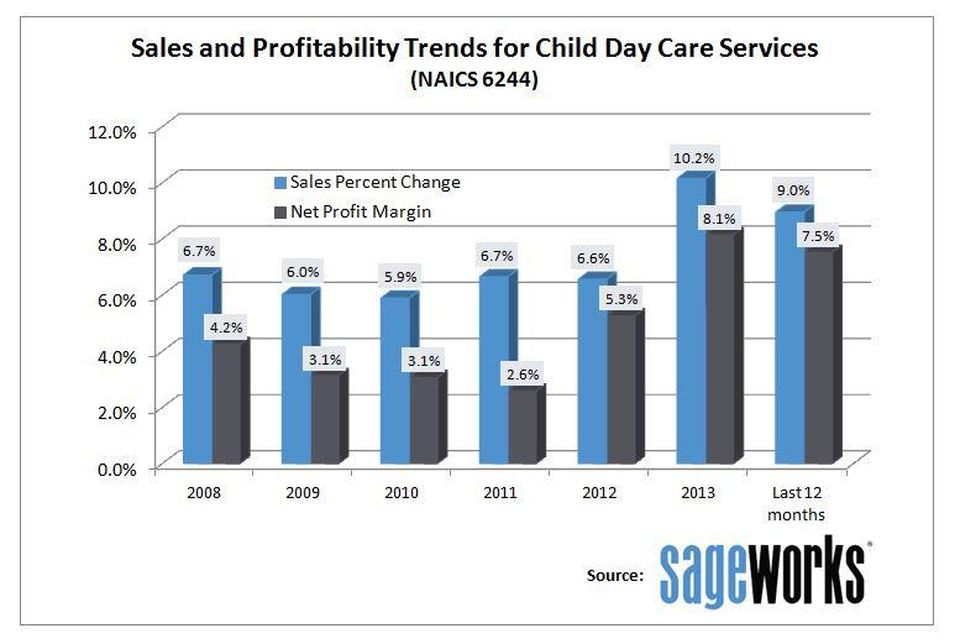


Figure Sales and Profitability Trends for Child Day Care Services from 2008-2014 (Biery, 2014)

Montessori schools are distinctive, especially among early childhood providers. The program prioritizes hands-on learning for children, using materials like blocks, paper, books, musical instruments, and analog toys and tools of that nature (American Montessori Society). Woodview Terrace, where the preschool class itself is the *actual* Montessori department, applies these principles to all age groups. As such, there is a deliberate effort to keep the more advanced technological teaching tools away from the students. Peer reviewed studies have shown, however, that not only do children receive high quantities of screen-time in their average day, but that many parents actively seek out childcare facilities with greater access to technology, despite some potential drawbacks in childhood growth and development (Rose et al., 2013).

**Interviews**

An initial interview was conducted with the author’s contact, Raquel M. (infant’s teacher), to gain in-depth knowledge of the departmental organization, staff, and workflow. The interview was open format, conversational, and lengthy, and resulted in most of the findings noted above. One of most important takeaways from that conversation was what Raquel and others noted over and over, “Montessori style means less technology – they want us to have the kids be more hands on, more involved with physical learning, and less time on screens. They already get a lot of that [screen time] at home” (R. Molina, personal communication, February 22, 2020). This is important to keep in context, in light of research within this paper related to non-Montessori schools, that not all technological advances will be appropriate for this particular center, and other centers guided by the same philosophy.

Three additional people were interviewed: Kacey B. (Director), Brittany S. (Toddler’s teacher), and Alyssa M. (Preschool aide). Kacey was chosen for an interview because of the nature of her role in the organization – she deals with both the business side and is in direct contact with parents and teachers on a daily basis. The others were chosen because they represent different areas of the facility and have first-hand knowledge of the organizational processes and childcare functions (see Appendix A for a list of the interview questions used).

All four interviews were conducted in-person on March 6, 2020. The last three were performed with a questionnaire (see Appendix A for interview questions), the questions focusing on the technologies they used in their daily workflows, as well as questions about changes, impacts, and improvements. The interviews were conducted during normal business operation, and so were kept to around twenty minutes each, to avoid any considerable disruption in work. Sometimes questions were followed up to get a better understanding of the answer, or to get a broader context on the response.

**Key findings**

Kacey, the director, described a different daycare center she worked in previously as using many more technologies than Woodview, and it’s worth noting a few of those for contrast:

* iPads in every classroom
  + Used for communication and creating reports
  + Messages could be sent to all devices at once, for the teachers’ benefit
* Advanced logistics software
  + A multipurpose platform that managed both personnel and client tracking
  + “That’s how we did our billing, we used software way more” (K. Brito, personal communication, March 6, 2020).
* Fingerprinting system
  + A security tool for parents to check their children in and out of the building

Conversely, the Woodview Terrace facility has one iPad (used for photo taking, and sometimes for playing music), basic software (along with other tools like Excel spreadsheets and handwritten reports), and a single-code manual door lock system. She does use software called *EZCare* to create billing reports for the owners (<https://www.ezcaresoftware.com/>). For the rest, she described her workflow as “very paper heavy.” Brittney, the toddler’s teacher, also talked about her previous workplace being “pretty tech heavy” using devices such as smart TV’s in the classrooms to augment daily interactive teaching lessons (Brittany S., personal communication, March 6, 2020).

Kacey, Brittney, and Alyssa all shared comments about needing improvements to the communications system in the building. With only one intercom going directly to one office, they find themselves in different areas at different times “unable to go to another room and get another teacher’s attention… it’s a big enough building, and we can’t leave our kids” (Alyssa M., personal communication, March 6, 2020). Brittney added, “when I’m here by myself, if I have to leave, I have to take all the kids with me… it’s a whole thing.” Kacey talked about how, when delivery drivers arrives and rings the doorbell, there’s oftentimes no one around who is able to go to the door, as teachers and aides are limited by restrictions that prevent them from leaving a room with children unattended (Daycare.com). She went on to suggest that at some point it “would be nice to have something like that… Ring doorbell, where you can see video on your phone when someone’s at the door.” All four interviewees suggested improvements in inter-room communication, “we almost never use the intercom… even when it’d be useful, there’s no guarantee she’s [Kacey] in the office… she might be busy or in another classroom” Raquel said. Brittany suggested the use of something like an Amazon echo in each class to perform that function. Additional improvements were proposed by both Kacey and Brittany – the report every teacher and/or aide uses to track child activities and updates throughout the day (given to the parent regularly) is on paper, and keeping track of those reports as well as getting them out to the parents is an analog, time-consuming process (see Appendix B for an example report). Brittany suggested solutions that might involve something along the lines of Kacey’s old workplace, with a digital tablet in every room, but for teacher’s use only, to limit the children’s interaction with digital devices.

Despite some of these shortcomings, however, each person interviewed had a positive outlook. They agreed with the mission of Montessori schools, overall, and noted some of the constructive aspects of the tools they do use. Alyssa even noted things like “notebooks, post-it notes, a lot of writing materials, a lot of books” are useful in helping children with their daily activities and addressing their individual needs. Both Alyssa and Brittany stressed the importance of using music in the classroom, both with hands-on instruments (“tambourines, maracas, drums… we’ll play music that they can play along to” – Alyssa), and using music to help with children’s moods – “if we want to give them calm [moods], we use music, and it can get them going when we want them to be active… I’ve been playing big, like, classical music lately and it really helps” (Brittany). Raquel plays childhood, Disney, and classical music in the background on the CD player for the babies and plays more upbeat songs to “get them moving, get them dancing… just having a fun time.” She also sometimes uses an old, deactivated phone, to play ‘shushing’ noises for one baby in particular, who has difficulty sleeping regularly. Brittany has a white noise machine that she uses to play soft sounds at naptime. Feedback from parents was also noted as positive, with very few changes ever suggested by them, according to the interviewees.

**Analysis and discussion**

**Impacts of recent technological change**

Getting breastmilk to a safe temperature used to be a tedious process. A mug was filled about halfway with water, then microwaved till hot. A baby bottle filled with cold breastmilk was then placed in the hot water in the mug. The teacher then had to wait until the milk was at the right temperature (warm enough to be tolerable but not room temp) by testing it on a skin surface, and then repeating this process for every single bottle. If not heated enough, the milk might not be sanitary for consumption. If heated too much, it might kill off the helpful bacteria in the milk, or the milk could sour (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). When the organization finally started using bottle warmers, the process vastly improved. Bottle warmers internally use a small hot plate, which in turn heats up a special type of rock, and the bottle is placed on top of that, within the device. Bottle warmers ensure the perfect temperature is reached every time, with a greatly reduced wait time. Now, the teacher can have bottles ready for the babies much more quickly and much more safely.

Before the sanitization machine was introduced, getting dishes and other washable items clean enough for regulatory standards was a chore. After manually washing items with soap and water, items would then have to be placed in a tub filled with hot water and bleach, and then air dried (regulations prohibit hand drying). Only recently installed, the new machine is able to do all of the cleaning and sanitization required in one step, and in two minutes. As with bottle warmers, this new process ensured both efficiency with time as well as health and safety. It also helps the center comply with Minnesota state regulations and recommendations for the sanitization of equipment and prevention of disease in daycare sites (Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department, 2017).

**Current technology concerns**

The security locks on the front doors are not digital, nor are they connected to any network. This can be a benefit in that they’re not remotely hackable, but their mechanism is ‘dumb’ enough to be a potential concern. The keypad is limited to a certain number of digits, and the code to get in is also only a small number. A single code is used for all parents and employees, meaning, if a parent loses custody rights, or an employee is terminated, they still have door access unless the code is changed for everyone. The code is changed very infrequently, leading to even more security concerns.

The PC used to log children and employees in and out is older and unreliable. It crashes on a regular basis, forcing parents and employees to sign in on paper. This is problematic, since the PC uses a local database to make sure identifier codes are valid. There is no easy way to check this manually. The software and hardware are older and updating them may require a significant time and monetary investment.

The current website (wtmchildcare.com) is quite simple and direct, but obviously older, having not been updated in a number of years, and neither disability nor mobile-device friendly. The contact page is just a link to an email (prone to spam, and less secure than a contact form) and the latest entry from the newsletter is from 2013 (it’s now sent out by email to the parents, but the site isn’t updated). There may be more underlying security concerns, and the lack of mobile-friendly responsive design could be an impediment to attracting a more modern audience.

**Futures analysis (3-5-year outlook)**

Technology isn’t necessarily detrimental to childhood development – it’s all about how it’s applied in an educational environment. Time spent by children on a screen or other digital device can be constructive, if used appropriately (Espinosa, 2006). That being said, given the constraints and directives of the Montessori program, it’s highly unlikely that Woodview Terrace will change its operational principles, and will continue limiting the students’ access to digital technology at near zero. What could change, and what might be a beneficial change, is the quantity and quality of the technologies used by staff.

It would be immensely helpful, based on both interviews and observations, for each classroom to have either a digital tablet or dedicated PC workstation to file reports digitally, with software that could keep track of daily inputs like feeding, lesson plans, incidents, and so on. It’s something unlikely to be implemented anytime soon, but the need is sufficient enough that it may precipitate an investment within the next few years, at the latest. The biggest barrier to a change that like, requiring at least 4-5 devices ranging in cost from 300-1000+ dollars, is, obviously, the up-front cost (not to mention the potential cost of software). One of the findings from the interviews, however, was additional time that some teachers spend after hours either filling out, organizing, or delivering reports, and those costs could eventually be offset by efficiencies in working-hours, or by allowing staff to accomplish less process-busy work.

Cost, and time, would also be the primary barriers to implementation of a building-wide communications system, but the value would be incalculable, adding not just to efficiency but the quality of care. This could be anything from a simple intercom or phone system that works between all rooms (rather than the current single-channel system) to utilization of the previously mentioned tablets / PC devices, or even the suggestion of something like the Amazon Echo, although that would come with it’s own privacy and security concerns. I think this is something even more likely to be invested in than the digital devices for reports – the physical constraints of teacher’s having to be in the room with a certain number of children at all times means that the business flow of operations can be interrupted at any time by a missed package or even a missed parent visit, and it also puts the center in danger of violating regulations regarding child-to-teacher ratios, if a teacher has to be out of the room for communications purposes at any time. These considerations may end up being the driving force behind a change, at least in this aspect.

Woodview Terrace’s policy prohibits use of personal cellphones during operation (unless used during breaks) but some flexibility is allowed – since music and sounds are such an integral part of the educational and logistical functions, teachers will use their phones (or bring in tablets) to play music and other audio for the children. The best-case plan is to find a remedy, and possibly invest in something like a room-to-room audio system that would allow each teacher to play appropriate audio for their individual needs. Such a system could have pre-approved playlists and other items, to ensure quality and consistency. This is a less likely scenario, one that is more likely to happen further down the road, if say, management or parents express discomfort at the use of personal devices around the children.

There are other changes that would be helpful to the organization but are less likely to be pursued in the near to mid-term – a comprehensive software application to keep track of regulatory paperwork and maintenance automation, additional sanitization equipment (UV lights, etc.), networked video systems, and so on. Parents rate the center highly for its programs and practices, so there’s no immediate impetus to change how things work. Most of the changes mentioned here are administrative in nature, but even those may take a long time, given the cost and time investment needed.

**Conclusion**

Modern teaching and administrative technology in childcare organizations is implemented based on the needs and local context of the individual facility. The regulatory environment is necessarily strict and can slow down the implementation of any new technological advance, due to restrictions on classroom size, privacy, and health, among other rules. Smaller childcare companies, like the Woodview Terrace Montessori, are further hampered by facility capacity and budgetary constraints, as well as the strict parameters of the Montessori education system. Despite all of this, anecdotal evidence (Google reviews and second-hand feedback from parents) suggests that, despite the lack of technological devices and services, the center is highly regarded for quality, safety, and health. There are certainly room for improvements on the educational side, but more immediately on the functional, organizational side. The near term may bring more technological improvements to some aspects of that, but it will probably take years for any broad, systemic enhancements to occur. For the meantime, the center makes the most out of the resources it has and will likely continue on that way for the foreseeable future.

**COVID-19 update**

Since the recent events with the coronavirus pandemic, attendance at the Woodview Terrace Montessori has fallen off dramatically, as many parents have either lost their jobs or started working from home. From a steady headcount of around 45-50 students to around 10, now, the center has had to make dramatic cuts in staff to accommodate the new situation. The chef is no longer full time, most aide and substitute positions have been cut, and classes have been combined, so now the infants teacher has both infants and toddler’s in her class, and there’s one full time teacher for preschoolers. New students haven’t arrived, and some families have cancelled their contracts altogether. Parents are no longer allowed inside the building – now, they have to text Kacey, the director, once they arrive, and their child is let inside. The facility is incredibly reliant on Kacey’s cellphone right now, with no better options available in the short term. The future is very uncertain. Technology improvements are about dead last on the list of priorities. There is some hope that business will start picking up again in the next few months, but every future plan is on hold until further notice.

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**Appendix A**

**Interview questions**

1. Do you consider yourself ‘tech savvy’?
2. What types of technology have you used in previous roles (if any)?
3. What types of technology do you use in your day-to-day workflow now?
4. What tool or technology has helped you the most in your role, what’s most useful?
5. What kinds of technologies in the classroom are children most responsive to?
6. Have you gotten any feedback or suggestions from children or parents about technology?
7. What kinds of technology can you think of that might help you, if you could have any?
8. Is there a tool or technology in your personal life that might also benefit your role?
9. Is there any tool or technology in the Center you think could be improved upon?
10. Is there any kind of system, technology, or tool that you’ve seen or heard about at a different school that would be useful here?

**Appendix B**

**Sample report (daily)**