

*YIMI CHILDREN'S
HOUSE*

MARKETING MONTESSORI: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING ENROLLMENT AT YIMI CHILDREN'S HOUSE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Photo by Yimi Children's House

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Montessori education is a scientific approach to learning when compared to traditional schooling. In this teaching style, children are encouraged to learn independently in the classroom through the use of interactive, tactile materials. They have the freedom to choose their own in-class activities, and lessons are tailored to the child's progress and academic interests.

As such a unique take on education, parents or educators may have trouble accepting an environment where young children are given so much academic independence. In China specifically, there are many obstacles to implementing Montessori education. The traditional education system there focuses on teacher-directed, memorization-heavy lessons, which directly contrasts the Montessori style. Parents also tend to be focused on results and academic ranking, while exams and grades are not present in Montessori.

Despite these difficulties, there is still a push for progressive teaching models in China, and an increasing number of institutions are being established. One such institution is our sponsor, Yimi Children's House (Yimi), a network of Montessori schools located in Hangzhou. They provide a pure kindergarten education to children ages 0-6 years old, and classes are divided into three grade levels. We are working with them to provide recommendations for improving, promoting, and increasing enrollment of their Nido (0-18 months) and IC (19 months-3 years) programs.

In order to accomplish this purpose, we first investigated the experiences of stakeholders at Yimi. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and surveys with parents and teachers, we hoped to identify areas for improvement and promotion in their Nido and IC classes. For teachers, we held semi-structured interviews to better understand the employee perspectives on Yimi, followed by a survey through WeChat for any teachers we were unable to talk to in-person. With parents, we chose to give surveys within focus groups to acquire a complete picture of their experiences at Yimi. Due to issues with scheduling IC parent focus groups, we also elected to send the survey to all parents at Yimi through WeChat. Through these methods, we gained new insights on the success of Yimi's current programs, and suggestions for future improvements.

To further analyze the practices at Yimi Children's House, it is important to understand how other Montessori schools operate in comparison. We accomplished this by benchmarking Yimi to Montessori programs in different countries, specifically Japan, India, and the United States. This way, we could compare and contrast their practices, and determine if Yimi could learn from any aspects of these other programs. We also conducted non-participant observation of the Nido and IC programs during class hours. Then, we could compare Yimi to the Montessori classrooms we studied during our expert interviews in the United States.

After completing this data collection, our group thoroughly analyzed all information gathered to identify any trends that might have been present. Our findings, however, were not what we anticipated. While our interview, focus group, and survey questions were primarily focused on the success of Montessori principles in the classroom, we discovered that most parents lacked a basic understanding of the Montessori method in general. In fact, more than half of both the current and prospective parents surveyed responded that they were only slightly familiar or not familiar at all with Montessori education. Responses from focus groups and survey data also showed that parents wanted increased education about this style of learning, and made suggestions for additional educational classes. We inferred that parents are likely drawn to Yimi because of the idea and popularity of Montessori, rather than true knowledge about its educational practices.

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Many of the remaining trends we found were influenced by this lack of understanding. All of these, as well as other trends that stood out to us, are listed below:

1. Despite the lack of understanding, parents still like Montessori principles, even if they do not realize they are characteristic of the learning style.

Current parents expressed that they expected their child to become more self-confident and independent, with freedom of choice in class. There was also significant support of the practical life and bilingual learning at Yimi. While these are all critical aspects of the Montessori philosophy, the majority of these parents responded that they were unfamiliar with Montessori education.

2. Due to the misunderstanding of Montessori principles, we also noticed a trend of miscommunication between parents and teachers about the implementation of Montessori techniques.

In parent focus groups, parents expressed that they did not understand certain classroom activities or the reasons behind them. Teachers also shared a need for better communication, and specified that parents are too result-oriented when it comes to classroom activities. We believe that a strong understanding of Montessori principles will help to have more effective communication between parents and teachers.

3. There was a need to address parent involvement.

From our current parent survey, we found that parents agreed that there were many opportunities for parent involvement, but thought that there should still be more opportunities. We believe that with these contrasting statements, parents might want to be more involved through updates on their children's progress or through new activities aside from what they already participate in. In fact, parents suggested ideas for new events, including ones based on furthering education about Yimi and its Montessori practices.

4. Discussion about the classroom environment and activities appeared frequently in our collected data.

Parents and teachers liked the Montessori environment for its natural layout and promotion of focus. Despite this support, there were still some suggestions for improvement including a revision of outdoor time, increased variety of classroom materials, and additional music activities.

5. Regarding the Nido and IC programs specifically, we noticed a great difference between the structure and curriculum of the Nido and IC program.

While the IC program runs for the whole day with a focus on Montessori academics, the Nido programs runs for an hour and half and centers on free play. For this reason, we believed it was important to compare the perspectives of teachers and parents across the two programs. The most significant trend we noticed was differences in parent interference and expectations. While nearly all of the IC parents said that parents did not interfere with their teaching, most of the Nido parents said that the parents did. For expectations, all of the IC teachers said that they believed their curriculum met parent expectations, while none of the Nido teachers did. With such a significant difference in responses, we strongly suggest that Yimi focuses on parent relations with the Nido program specifically.

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6. As for the results of our benchmarking, Japan became the main focus of our comparative analysis due to the similarities in educational perspectives in Japan and China.

Our HDU buddies helped us to compare and contrast the administration, teachers, and curriculum of Montessori schools in these two countries. They found that both systems emphasized practical life and teacher observation for curriculum improvement. Regarding differences, Chinese Montessori focuses on having a personalized curriculum for the students whereas Japanese education emphasizes independence and peer interaction instead.

7. Lastly, we analyzed trends on why both parents and teachers chose to join Yimi's community, to look for evidence we could use in promoting their programs.

The most common trend for teachers was that they chose to work at Yimi because it was close to their home. As for parents, most were recommended to Yimi by friends or family, and stayed because they feel that Yimi provides a positive environment for their child. Many parents also believe that Yimi's teachers are qualified.

Overall, we used this data analysis and the trends we discovered to come up with a set of recommendations to Yimi Children's House for improving, promoting, and increasing enrollment of their Nido and IC programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Photo by Matthew Finley

RECOMMENDATIONS

All of our findings lead us to come up with a set of recommendations to Yimi Children's House for improving, promoting, and increasing enrollment of their Nido and IC programs:

1. Provide accessible resources, such as programs and lectures, to educate parents about Montessori philosophy. We suggest lectures and programs to take place on multiple days, multiple locations, and/or multiple times, including in person and on-line.
2. Improve communication between parents and teachers to build a greater trust between both parties. We suggest that teachers encourage parents to ask questions after class, either in-person or through WeChat, about any in-class activities they did not understand. We also suggest that teachers are more transparent about the connection between in-class activities and the Montessori principles.
3. Organize new activities for parents to be involved in the classrooms. We suggest increasing the variety of activities and the times they are held, so parents who cannot normally participate have more opportunities to attend. We also suggest holding more events that focus on building the relationship between parents and teachers.
4. Continue working to improve the Montessori environment. Based on the advice of both parents and teachers, we suggest that improvements be made to the outdoor time at all campuses, specifically increasing the time in nature and adding more outdoor activities. We also suggest rotating the toys and Montessori materials in the Nido classrooms more frequently.
5. Focus on educating parents and building credibility of the Nido program before expanding the program to other campuses. We noticed a significant difference in parent interference and expectations between the Nido and IC programs. Thus, we suggest holding more informational events to increase Nido parent's trust in the school, and make the methods seem more reliable.