The Perfect Union: The Marriage of Montessori and Special Education

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Montessori and special education have had a long courtship, starting over a hundred years ago when Maria began working with children with special needs. She knew the value that this methodology brought to all students, both typically developing and those with developmental and learning challenges.

There are specific, research based practices that are utilized within the inclusive classroom and these correspond definitively with concepts and pedagogical practices demonstrated within Montessori environments. According to experts, Mastropieri, M. A. & Scruggs, T. E. (2004, 2010), authors of The Inclusive Classroom: Strategies for Effective Instruction, and outlined throughout the article,”Montessori Instruction: A Model for Inclusion in Early Childhood Classrooms,” by McKenzie and Zascavage (2012), focusing on these practices is crucial within the inclusive classroom environment: Scope and Sequence; Pacing; and Types of Learning.

These concepts permeate the Montessori environment and are evidence of the similar approaches within both these fields of education. But, most significantly, are important considerations for all learners.

Scope & Sequence

The field of special education defines this as content that builds new learning and skills on previously acquired learning. The Montessori curriculum is designed to start at age 3 and continues through the child’s academic career, using materials that progress and can be adapted to move the child ever deeper into abstraction and more complex knowledge. A great example of this is the trinomial cube, at first an exercise in visual discrimination, that eventually teaches the child the algebraic formula \((a+b+c)^3\).

Pacing

Pacing is the speed that students move through the curriculum. This is a challenge for children with special needs and can be problematic if they are required to keep pace with 24 other students. In a Montessori classroom, the individual child’s readiness is what determines their pace. Repetition is permitted and encouraged to ensure mastery, time is allowed for completion, adaptations are made to meet the child’s needs, and self-direction is reinforced. This is inherent in the Montessori practice.

Types of Learning

There are many types of learning, as described by Mastropieri and Scruggs (2004), that are fundamental to educating children with special needs. We’ve chose to focus on these four:

Discrimination Learning- the sensorial materials support early development of sensory discrimination, progressing to higher level processing (Lillard, 2005, as referenced in...
McKenzie and Zascavage, 2012). From the Pink Tower to the Constructive Triangles, these materials refine the child’s ability to discriminate and are foundational for the child’s development in all other academic areas.

Factual Learning- the math materials are the best example of supporting factual learning by giving the child a concrete experience, enabling them to use the ‘materialized abstraction’ until they are cognitively ready to move independently into abstraction. The Golden beads, stamp game, the checkerboard, and the bead cabinet that begins with linear counting and eventually is used for squaring and cubing, are all examples of the many manipulative materials that isolate difficulties and support learning.

Rule Learning- rules we think of as common sense are not easily attained by children with special needs and need to be intentionally taught. In a Montessori classroom, grace and courtesy is not only modeled, but lessons for everything from moving through the classroom to dealing with conflict are clearly taught. Children in a Montessori classroom experience respect at a deep level, with all work reinforcing order, concentration, and respect for community.

Procedural Learning- dealing with the execution of completing a task, Montessorians would call this ‘order’. The prepared environment ensures that children know how to complete works and function independently in a community of learners. One of the first lessons learned in a Montessori classroom is how to choose work, complete the work successfully by following a sequence, and returning the work to a specific shelf.

These two methodologies, Montessori and special education, have tied the knot and made their union official. Xavier University’s Montessori Institute is now offering a dual license, double major, in Montessori and Special Education, offering current undergraduates the opportunity to earn an AMS Early Childhood credential, as well as becoming dually licensed, earning an Ohio prek-grade 3 license and an Early Childhood Intervention Specialist license.

The ultimate goal in all teaching is to provide the best possible education for all learners. The connection that exists between Montessori and Special Education strengthens learning for all children. Recognizing the distinct connections, and understanding the terms and procedures that may be unique to both pedagogies, are crucial considerations as we strive to help each child reach their full potential.

References:
