

AMS POSITION PAPER



INCLUSION

Legislation (PL 94-142 and PL 99-457) mandated mainstreaming or inclusion of children with special needs into classrooms with typically developing peers. While this legislation specifies current mandates for educational practices, it is necessary to examine supports and nurture the individual needs of each child, as well as the whole group.

Children with developmental needs form a very diverse group, with some developmental needs quite different from those of typically developing peers. However, it is important to recognize that all children, with or without diagnosed special needs, have numerous commonly held needs that can be accommodated in a learning environment with full inclusion.

Maria Montessori, an Italian physician/educator at the turn of the century, began her work with "mentally deficient" children in public asylums. Based upon her studies of early pioneers in the field of special education and her observations of children using concrete learning materials that she accepted and developed, Montessori demonstrated that significant physical and cognitive development was possible for children with special needs whom society had abandoned.

Many characteristics of the Montessori materials and learning environment support the developmental needs of all children and, additionally, reflect what the field of special education deems the best practice techniques. This makes the Montessori method very viable for schools practicing or implementing a program of full inclusion. Specifically:

- Montessori is a personalized approach, which recognizes that each child learns with a unique style and pace. It is a child-centered holistic approach acknowledging that the child's development and education involved many aspects: physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and moral. This means that the children's daily activities are based on their own needs, strengths and developmental stages. It also means that the writing and implementation of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) and Individual Family Service Programs (IFSPs), as required by law for children with special needs, are easily accomplished in a Montessori environment.
- The Montessori learning environment changes and grows with the developmental needs of each child. The learning materials offer concrete, multi-sensory experiences which actively engage children, correcting, giving the children immediate feedback, and increasing their opportunities for self-directed work. The materials contain many aims or goals and can often be explored at different levels. Children's developmental progress, learning style, and interests are assessed through scientific observation by the classroom teacher, who directs the lessons/materials offered. This is a reflection of the Curriculum Based Assessment approach currently being mandated. The Montessori environment allows children with quite different developmental needs to learn side-by-side with the same materials.
- All Montessori classrooms contain a three-year age span. This fosters a sense of community in which children come to naturally help and teach one another. Every member is valued for their contribution to the whole. This gives children with special needs the chance to interact with a wide range of people, increasing their motivation and their opportunities to generalize learned skills in new situations. As they grow older, they too become one of the oldest and can experience the satisfaction of helping or teaching another. Finally, this means that the teacher can perfect certain skills specific to a child's needs (e.g., positioning or sign language), allowing for a more consistent education.
- Team teaching is typical in a Montessori environment, where professionals work together, sharing information and responsibility. This approach lends itself well to inclusion, where many specialists are needed to insure that children with special needs are receiving

appropriate and necessary services. A transdisciplinary approach, where all specialists/ teachers share responsibility, is beneficial to all children in the classroom.

- Montessori philosophy recognizes parents as an integral part of a child's education. This means that what is required by law -- the inclusion of parents as a part of the transdisciplinary team -- is a natural part of daily classroom life.
- The structure in a Montessori classroom allows freedom of movement and free choice of activities. This encourages the development of independence, initiative and decision making. Children interact socially through most of the school day, which fosters enriched natural school opportunities. Lessons in grace and courtesy from teachers aid the development of positive social skills. Older children serve as models, which can decrease negative or maladaptive behavior. All of this benefits children with special needs who, as a group, tend to have lower social skills and less independent behaviors, and who make few choices that actually affect the events of their day.

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The American Montessori Society (AMS) is a nonprofit education society founded in 1960 whose purpose is to help children develop their potential through the educational principles of Dr. Maria Montessori. This includes the following: developing Montessori programs, accrediting schools, granting credentials, encouraging research, organizing seminars and symposia, and promoting all other areas which relate to the dissemination of Montessori philosophy.

