



Cultivating an Attitude for Inclusive Classrooms: Shifting Our Thinking

“It seems like more and more of my students are having trouble settling in.” “I’ve tried everything, but she just can’t follow directions.” “We’ve worked and worked but he isn’t remembering his sounds.” “Kids seem different these days—I just don’t know what to do.” Sound familiar?

Montessori teachers in all settings, public and independent, are expressing concerns about the numbers of students whose behavior is a challenge, who seem unmotivated and easily distracted, and who aren’t learning in the way we have come to expect of “Montessori children.”

What we do know is that the incidence of students with identified “special needs” is increasing. The Center for Disease Control (CDC), using data from 2012, estimated that 1 in 68 children have been identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Data from 2011-12 estimates that 11% of children age 4-17 have been labeled ADHD. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2018) states that 14% of school age children have been identified with special needs, including specific learning disabilities, autism, developmental delays, and mental health issues. However, a more recent figure of 15-20% is more commonly stated for children having a variety of diverse needs in learning and behavior.

A number of researchers have hypothesized reasons for these increases, but the Star Institute for Sensory Processing Disorder has shared data that could indicate a commonality across identified needs and labels.

- 90% of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder have sensory processing disorders.
- 60% of children identified as exhibiting Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder were found to have sensory processing disorders.

Students with a Specific Learning Disability, Developmental Delay, and experiencing trauma have, or show behaviors consistent with, sensory processing disorder.

The myths: “I can’t work with children with special needs. I don’t have a special education degree or training.” “If I have to focus all of my time on this one student, I won’t have time for the other 26 in my class.” “If we can get the child diagnosed, we will have a label that will tell us what to do.”

Our roots: Our hesitancy about our ability to support students with challenges is understandable. But the good news is that the Montessori system of education has a number of “built-ins” for addressing individual needs. With some knowledge and understanding there is much we have to offer to support all students. By creating an “inclusive classroom” we can accept, respect, and benefit all our children. A child is not a label, and a label only gives us the broadest of contexts for understanding behavior and learning challenges.

The scope of this article is not the characteristics and definitions of a given diagnosis. “Special education” really is based on observation, individualized supports, understanding of some tools and techniques for support, and guiding a child to more positive behavior and learning.

There is no set “program” that works for all children with a shared diagnosis.

Our attitude as educators and school leaders is the first step in creating an inclusive classroom. All children, regardless of needs or challenges, want to belong, want to be a valued member of their community, want to succeed, and get along with others. There are individual supports, the tools, and techniques, for working with children with challenges of behavior and learning that we can learn to use. Each of our students is a unique individual, with strengths and challenges and as Montessori educators we have the advantage and the support of an amazing system for understanding, teaching, and supporting all children. With an open mindset for learning, and as our knowledge increases, our confidence in our ability is key to serving most all children in our Montessori classrooms.

Creating an inclusion classroom environment

An inclusion classroom is one in which all children can spend most of their time in the general classroom and meet academic and behavioral goals with full access, full participation, and a sense of belonging and community. We understood that:

- Healthy social development is a primary emphasis in our schools, with the greatest needs and greatest development in early childhood and adolescence.
- All children learn in different ways at different rates.
- It’s every child’s right to be accepted. An inclusive classroom benefits all with the opportunity to understand that we all have strengths and challenges, and that we can respect each other’s unique contributions.

What is good for one is good for all.

When we As Montessori educators, we know the foundational importance of a properly prepared environment. Our goal is to prepare the optimal physical, and temporal, and social-emotional environment that will enable all students to thrive. Our training in observation, not just record keeping of lessons presented, but truly seeing with the eye of the scientist, as Dr. Montessori tells us, will give us the information we need. Our knowledge of child development and ability to determine typical and atypical growth in each domain, the characteristics and needs of the children in each Plane of

Development, and our ability to recognize Sensitive periods has to guide our ability to individualize for each student. Our philosophy grounds us in an attitude of acceptance, and respect for each child giving us the tools to model grace and courtesy, and positive ways to interact for our students and create a true community of “social cohesion.”

With an M.Ed. in special education and a Montessori credential, and with many years of experience creating inclusive classrooms within a school system, she is able to provide a unique perspective as she provides consultations for schools to develop and support plans for their classrooms and individual students. She can be reached at christine@montessori-now.com