

MONTESSORI AND LEARNING DIFFERENCES - Article for Montessori Life

By Joyce S. Pickering, Hum.D.

Executive Director of Shelton School & Evaluation Center

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Learning differences include Dyslexia and Related Disorders, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Math Disorder, Reading Comprehension Disorder, Oral Language Disorder and Written Expression Disorder. Dyslexia is a genetic difference. Related Disorders may be hereditary or acquired.

Dyslexia is caused by anatomical differences in the brain. If an appropriate pre-school program is offered to this child, and reading, writing, and spelling are introduced through a Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) approach, the learning difference does not become a learning disability. This neurological difference cannot be cured, but can be treated so that the child can have functional written language skills.

ADHD is a biochemical difference in which the neurotransmitters, which are released into the brain to sustain attention, are released insufficiently. As a result the child is seen to be impulsive, inattentive, and for some, hyperactive in behavior. In addition to the attention challenges, this child often has weaknesses in math and reading comprehension.

Children with oral language disorders do not learn to associate meaning to the spoken word in a normal manner. Brain function in the left temporal hemisphere is different. Vocabulary, syntax, and semantics do not develop normally.

Children with oral and written language disorders benefit from the Montessori method. They benefit even more if the teacher has training in recognizing these differences and applying the Montessori method to those who are at risk for dyslexia and related disorders. In addition, if a Montessorian is trained in a MSL approach, they can deliver the best services to at risk/LD students.

Questions about Montessori and Learning Differences:

1. In a traditional Montessori classroom of 30 children how many LD children will there be?

If the usual projection of 15% of the population is used, there will be four to five children. However, more parents with at risk children seek out the individualization of the Montessori school, so the percentage is usually higher in Montessori schools, in my experience.

2. What consideration should be made in training the classroom assistant?

Ideally, both the teacher and classroom assistant should have training in applying the Montessori approach to the at risk or diagnosed LD student. For any specific population such as gifted, LD, physically handicapped, autistic, etc., knowing the characteristics and special needs helps the educator to match the Montessori lessons to the specific abilities and learning differences of the student.

3. How can the Montessorian receive specific training in helping the at risk/LD child?

There are courses given each summer at The Shelton School in Dallas, Texas for this specific training. I am uninformed about any other courses giving training on Montessori

and the LD child; however, I am interested in compiling a list which will be published as soon as it is available.

4. What is a reasonable work cycle for at risk/LD students?

In the programs I have directed, in which there is an average class, some with and some not demonstrating learning differences, I have a schedule of a normal day (8:00 to 3:00 PM). If a specific child cannot handle this time frame successfully, I shorten his day to a time span in which he/she can be successful and prorate the tuition accordingly. This time may be increased over the period of a school year.

As to a work cycle within the day, I usually have a two to two one-half hour work period and expect all students to be able to be involved during this time. The teacher of the at risk/LD child must:

- a) make more choices for the at risk/LD to teach him a work cycle;
 - b) give this child more direct presentations;
 - c) break presentations into smaller steps with fewer pieces of the equipment used (for example; the hundreds board/divide the tiles into five baskets with 20 numerals in each basket, when the child can successfully use the first basket, add the second, etc.)
 - d) after the initial presentation, attach language to each activity and piece of equipment used in the activity;
 - e) accept that attention and focus is the child's and the teacher's responsibility;
 - f) accept that there will be more non-productive time for this child than a child who can attend and process well and therefore is capable of self-direction and discovery learning.
- The teacher is with him/her more than with most students, but cannot help him exclusively and at the same time meet the needs of other students.

5. What is the role of the Specialty Guides (art, Spanish, gym)?

These teachers, as all staff in the school, need to have basic training in the strategies to make at risk/LD students successful in their classes. Given that information, most children will be able to handle specials; but some will not. I suggest an alternate plan; stay in the room with me and choose from an art shelf with appropriate activities I have presented, or watch a video cartoon in Spanish or listen to an audio tape prepared for the child in Spanish with pictures he can point to, or one to one, or in a small group go with me or my aide to an area in which we work on perceptual motor skills from a Perceptual Motor Skills manual. The important factor here, as in everything we do, is to set up an environment and a lesson that will help the child to be successful.

More questions and answers next issue. Topic: Discipline - You may send in your questions to the editor for future publications.