

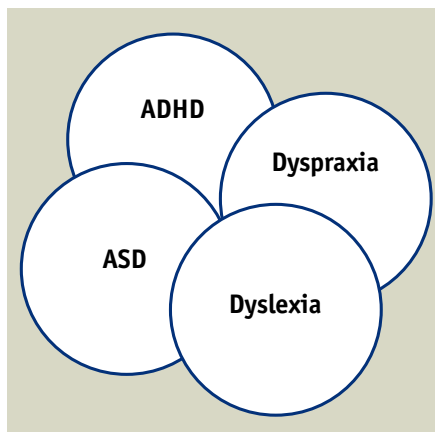
# Learning Differences the Montessori Way



Maria Montessori's perception of *learning differences*\* extended to each and every child, including the gifted and able, and those with special or differing needs. Wendy Fidler explains that each child must make his own unique journey by and for himself as he strives to make sense of, communicate with and manage independently in the everyday activities of living and learning.

*"The child should be given the freedom to develop within the laws of natural development."* Montessori, M. "What you should know about your child"

Every child possesses a tremendous inner drive to learn, or 'work' as Montessori described it, but some children are born with *specific* learning differences that are *constitutional in origin*, i.e. they are in the make up of the child and are independent of socio-economic or language background, and which can occur at any level of intellectual ability. Indeed, many very able and gifted children have, in addition,



*Some children exhibit symptoms of several specific learning differences, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyspraxia, Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and Dyslexia. The disorders exist co-morbidly, overlapping and combine to produce new difficulties.*

in' serve to exacerbate matters; it is unusual to find a child who has a single specific learning difficulty. In practice, children often have symptoms of two or three or even a range of co-morbid dysfunctions, i.e. they overlap and compound each other.

Hence, there *will be*, for example, children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), who might usually benefit from a rich, multi-sensory environment, who

training and her didactic apparatus on the experience she gained through observing and teaching children who were socially disaffected and who had learning difficulties.

The reasons for Montessori's social and academic successes with the children in the early Casa de Bambini are as relevant today as they were then; all children need individual attention, observation and lesson preparation. In modern parlance, Montessori provided both big chunk (or whole picture) learning *and* little chunk (or small picture) learning, so that whichever preferred learning style children had, they experienced that *and* a secondary method of learning too. The acquisition of learning is similar to the facility with which small children acquire two or more languages.

For example, children acquire a big chunk, three-dimensional, or *solid* concept of the decimal system when using the Pink Tower or Broad Stairs, and they progress from small chunk, two-dimensional, or *plane* concept of the decimal system when they combine their understanding of the short coloured bead stair, the golden beads, Seguin boards etc.

Once children grasp the general principles of the concept, dealing with its material application is simple.

**"...we are seeing an increase in disaffected children with low self esteem, a sense of failure, poor social conscience and little aptitude for enterprise."**

specific learning difficulties which they must navigate as they progress into adulthood.

In the modern era of common curricula for all children, where many children experience a one-size-fits-all education which often leaves little or no time for innovation and creativity in teaching and learning, and even less for exploring individual children's learning styles, it is not surprising that we are seeing an increase in disaffected children with low self-esteem, a sense of failure, poor social conscience and little aptitude for enterprise.

Often, the 'labels' that educators and clinicians seek for children who 'don't fit

also exhibit symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); these children's needs will not be adequately addressed in such an environment.

Clearly, an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Statement of Special Educational Needs, which focuses only on one 'label' is not designed to produce the best learning environment. Sadly, there are many examples of inconsistent and inaccurate diagnoses, which result in strains on relationships at school and at home and often result in a downward spiral of living and learning performance for the child.

Montessori based her educational philosophy, her method of teacher

Children who start their education in a Montessori environment are clearly at an advantage; the needs of children with constitutional specific learning difficulties are often fully met by the environment that is uniquely designed for such a purpose. ■

\*It is current good practice to use the term *learning difference*, rather than *learning difficulty*. Many children often have no difficulty in learning if the method of teaching or the learning environment (included those in it) is adjusted to suits their needs.

#### Reference:

Montessori, M (1961), *What You Should Know About Your Child*, AMI, Clío Press, Oxford, Ch 4.

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