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Biography : I am the program director and owner of One World Montessori School (for students aged 2.5 to 6 years old) in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and have been operating schools since 1997, first in England and in Canada since 2003. I have a Montessori Diploma (Birth to six years) from St. Nicholas Center of Montessori Education, London, England, a graduate diploma in Applied Psychology from the University of Calgary and a M.Ed. in Special Education from Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia.

I am interested in contemporary special education issues related to young students, as I recognize that early intervention is the key to student success. Our school is open to ALL students irrespective of their exceptional needs and we aim to provide a Montessori education of excellence to every child.

Dealing with Individual Learning Differences in a Montessori Classroom

There are ongoing discussions on whether teachers who work with students with exceptional learning needs have sufficient qualifications and knowledge. In Montessori classrooms, all children are considered 'special' and therefore in many respects, all practitioners are 'special needs educators'. However, there are large variations in teacher knowledge and experience, and a central challenge we face is linking inclusive policies with effective teaching practices. Research indicates that teaching which is responsive to diversity can have a positive impact on all students including those on either end of the achievement spectrum. The Council of Exceptional Children has established a set of professional standards describing the key skills that special educators should acquire (CEC, 2003). These standards clarify the essential knowledge that educators require in order to achieve professional competence. In this paper, I have related the CEC (2003) standard that discusses "Individual Learning Differences" within a Montessori early years setting, to inform early year's practitioners about possible modifications and adaptations necessary for students with exceptional learning and behavioral needs.

A Teacher's View

Planning individualized curriculums based on the behavioral and academic needs of every child may pose challenges for Montessori educators. We live in an increasingly diverse society and we see a reflection of it in our school communities. From a personal standpoint, I have noted more diversity within Montessori classrooms than in traditional pre-schools. It is therefore vital that educators respect diversity in their classrooms and provide understanding, support and hope to children who struggle at school because of

their learning differences. Below are some comments from a Montessori teacher about

individual learning differences.

> "Being sensitive to learning differences is often in the forefront of my mind. I recognize that learning differences are influenced by emotional, sociological, psychological, physical, environmental, and familial experiences. Therefore, my teaching approaches need to have the flexibility to cater to each child's unique needs, and I need to modify certain aspects of my peaceful Montessori classroom to accommodate these children.

> My class has a diverse mix of students: those from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds; those that have speech and language difficulties; or, those that have social, emotional or behavioral difficulties. I currently have 1 student who is high functioning autistic , 1 student who has mild/moderate social, emotional and behavioral difficulties together with speech and communication difficulties, 1 student who is learning disabled (LD), and 3 students who have English as a second language (ESL). I overcome the obstacles by organizing Montessori activities based on the foundational knowledge that I have of these children.

> I gain this knowledge by developing positive and trusting relationships with families. By meeting with parents, I learn about their diverse cultural beliefs and values and their concerns about learning. Their viewpoints also help in identifying their children's learning styles, motivation, goals, strengths and challenges."

What Do the Professional Standards Say about Individual Learning Differences?

Recognizing and dealing with Individual Learning Differences is at the core of special

and inclusive education. Effective teachers understand and have an in depth knowledge of the

unique academic, social, and emotional needs of exceptional children and are able to support

them throughout their school life. Teachers recognize their students' strengths and challenges and

can identify learning and motivational styles. They use this knowledge to develop and implement

purposeful activities that will have positive outcomes on students' academic, social and

behavioral development.

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about disability can have an impact on their effectiveness

in creating better learning environments for their students. Negative beliefs create barriers

between teachers and students. Teachers understand that their beliefs can affect the learning,

behavior and self esteem of their students and are therefore sensitive to their students learning

differences. Teachers are aware of the potential negative impact that disabilities have on learning.

They understand that their actions can affect the learning, behavior and self-esteem of their students. Special educators understand that traditional beliefs, values and cultures within and across the community can affect relationships between students, their families and the school. They are aware that primary language, family background, culture, previous experiences and learning profiles interact with the individual's exceptional condition and therefore impact students' academic and social abilities, attitudes, values, interests and career options. Teachers are knowledgeable about family expectations for each student. They gain an understanding of the family's cultural beliefs by developing relationships with the family.

Understanding of learning differences and their interactions, provide teachers with the foundations to individualize instruction, and adapt content and activities to build on a student's intellectual, sensorial, emotional and communication abilities. Teachers recognize that children's thinking processes, aptitudes, preferences, learning styles, and motivation differs. Therefore, the materials and activities offered to students are carefully selected, are meaningful and challenging. Areas of need are supported through knowledge of the individual's strength. Teachers offer their students choices based on their abilities and learning styles. They are aware of a variety of resources, materials and activities matched to students' strengths and needs to enhance skill development. They recognize that sensory and environmental stimuli impacts learning. They develop instruction by linking new ideas with the student's prior knowledge and experiences.

In a nutshell, effective educators are enthusiastic about each learner's gifts, talents and unique learning differences. They value diversity when planning activities. They value and respect their students as partners in making choices. They have respect for the uniqueness and cultural differences in families and the impact that cultural diversity has on education. They plan individualized, meaningful and challenging teaching strategies based on the foundation of their knowledge on individual learning differences. (Adapted from CEC Professional Standards 2003).

Inquiry Questions

Listed below are some questions that can be used as a framework to guide the inquiry process for Individual learning needs in a Montessori classroom.

- Why is it important for educators to understand that beliefs, traditions and values across cultures affect relationships between students, their families and the school community?

- How do teachers' beliefs and attitudes about diversity impact learning outcomes of their students?

- What can teachers do to gain an understanding of the primary language, culture and familial backgrounds? How do these factors interact with the individual's exceptional condition to impact on their academic and social abilities, attitudes, values, and interests?

- Why is an understanding of learning differences a critical foundation for individualizing instruction?

- What are some ways that educators individualize instruction to provide meaningful and challenging learning for students with exceptional needs?

Inquiry into Effective Practice

In the traditional school system, children with exceptional needs have been constantly marginalized, and their likely outcomes at school are often gloomy. They are often failures at school because the school system is standardized, supports the majority, and does not recognize the many gifts that exceptional children have. As a result, at-risk students have to fit into an existing rigid school system, which unfortunately cannot be moulded to accommodate and include them. At school, these students do not have the opportunity to reach their optimum learning potential, unless educators commit themselves to shaping the success of these students and are sensitive to their learning differences.

Understanding that beliefs, traditions and values across cultures affect relationships between students, their families and the school community.

We live in a multi-cultural society where diversity is embraced and respected. In school heterogeneous communities, cultural diversity becomes more apparent, and educators need to be conscious of the dynamics that are inherent when students from different cultural and traditional backgrounds interact in social situations. People's backgrounds, ways of communicating, beliefs, values and traditions vary. Their choices, even in a school setting are affected by their culture. Educators might sometimes assume that a common culture is shared between racial, linguistic and religious groups. However, assimilation has created multitudes of sub-cultures within groups. In schools, further diversity is created by gender, exceptional conditions and cultural learning differences.

Culturally diverse families face several barriers in their efforts to get involved with the school and their child's learning. According to the document *Toward Cultural Competency: A Practical Guide to Facilitate Active Participation in Culturally Diverse Families in Schools* by Ngo (2003), these barriers are caused due to a) lack of understanding of the Canadian school system, b) language differences, c) uncertainty of what to do and feelings of inadequacy, d) confusion about the teacher's role, e) negative school experiences, e) cultural conflicts, f) unwelcome school environment, and g) school practices that do not accommodate the diversity of families. The document suggests that all school personnel should develop cultural 'competency', by being aware of different cultural contexts.

Teachers need to be aware of how their actions can have either a positive or a negative impact on their students and families. In order to maintain a positive school climate, cultural self-evaluation and assessment would help educators analyze how their influences and conduct affect people from other cultures. For example being aware of one's body language or word tones may avoid miscommunication because these may in acceptable in some cultures and not to others.

Disparities between different cultural norms and beliefs can also create barriers between students in the school. Cultural awareness may be developed within all members of the classroom by presenting opportunities for multicultural exposure by means of books, school field trips, and curriculum based activities that reflect and teach diversity.

Practitioners need to assess their school culture so that they can make provisions for accommodating diverse students. For example, in Montessori schools learning is through self-discovery and independent learning is encouraged to develop self-

motivation. In certain cultures, children learn through oral communication or by rote, and they may need explicit instruction on how to learn through self-discovery. If their needs go unnoticed, their learning outcomes may be poor and this could lead to students being incorrectly labeled. Consequently barriers may be created between families and schools. Schools that have their own cultures, which promote diversity, will result in minimizing learning barriers. (Mentis, Quinn, Ryba 2005).

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes about diversity impact learning outcomes

Students are influenced by their teachers and learn from them by observing their practices (Miller & Pedro 2006). Therefore our attitudes can make or break the learning experiences of children who live with the challenges of diversity. In order to positively impact student learning outcomes, we need to maintain positive attitudes, open communication and mutually respectful relationships (Eberly, Kinzal & Joshi 2005). Respect for every individual creates a safe classroom environment, where every student feels emotionally secure and valued. Students who do not feel safe will find it impossible to develop concentration or build relationships with other people (Wessler 2003, as cited in Miller & Pedro 2006). Positive communication and feedback with nonjudgmental comments creates a positive relationship between teacher expectations and student outcomes. If teachers recognize, and uphold the dignity of students, if they nurture and respect their students regardless of their learning differences, then students will be motivated to learn, and this will be reflected in their learning outcomes.

Arthurgarmon (2005) discusses key factors related to positive attitudes and beliefs about diversity. These include openness, self-awareness, self-reflectiveness, commitment

to social justice, and experiences that include inter-cultural, educational and support group experiences.

Teacher perceptions towards social and ethnic diversity govern the interaction between them and their students. Therefore, they should periodically reflect on biases and negative feelings that they might bear. Many teachers hold negative attitudes and perceptions about minority learners; therefore Mark & Terrill (2000) suggest that professional development programs should allow teachers to examine their own biases and explore and reflect on how knowledge is culture and language bound.

Understanding primary language, culture and familial backgrounds, and ways these factors interact with the individual's exceptional condition to impact academic and social abilities, attitudes, values, and interests

We are all influenced by our social and cultural backgrounds. This point was underlined by the work of Lev Vygotsky (1934/1962) who examined the critical roles of society for the development of cognition. His theory states that development is the result of social learning through internalization of culture and social relationships. He stresses the importance of past experiences and prior knowledge in making sense of new situations or present experiences. In other words, all new knowledge and skills are influenced by culture and familial backgrounds. This is most evident in language development for creating meaning and linking new ideas to past experiences. Giving diverse learners the opportunity to make associative links to their prior experiences and knowledge is vital to their learning processes (Alton Lee, 2003). These approaches optimize student outcomes.

Culture is passed from parent to child through skills, styles and habits that increases the child's cognitive abilities and influences the child's values, aspirations and motives to succeed. Parent and family involvement at home has a more significant impact on children's outcomes than parent and family involvement in school activities. (Christenson & Sheridon 2001, Trusty 1999, Kasprow & Fendrich 1999 as cited in Carter 2002). Therefore, teachers must identify ways of partnering with families and respecting and validating the cultures of their homes.   Parental involvement can be a protective factor in counteracting risk conditions that lead to school underachievement (Carter 2002).

As educators, we can develop cultural competency by identifying our own cultural development. We can then identify, recognize and study the cultural, ethnic, religious, social and gender factors that influence our students' learning. For instance we can identify the social behavior that originates in different cultural and ethnic values and customs; or identify and interpret the socio-economic, familial and biological factors that affect and influence students' lives and consequently their learning outcomes. Cultural awareness requires people to acknowledge and appreciate that culture lives in their experiences, language and interpretation (Offet-Gartner 2005). By demonstrating cross-cultural sensitivity, we will be in a better position to provide equal opportunities for all students to learn. Information about students' prior knowledge, skills and cultural experiences is very useful in making instructional decisions.

In our teaching role, it is important for us to understand parental motivation for involvement in their children's education. We also need to link parent's beliefs on achievement in different educational contexts. Parent/school partnerships provide a cost-

effective approach to supporting the learning of diverse students. Collaboration with families may help educators get a better understanding of how their children's academic and social abilities, attitudes, values or interests are impacted by their familial backgrounds.

Understanding learning differences is a critical foundation for individualizing instruction

Teachers sometimes work in schools where the population is very different to what they encountered when they were children. They may make false assumptions concerning groups of children. By being well read, we can stay open to new cultural experiences and reflect on how to use these experiences as a context for better learning. It is only through our knowledge base and understanding of learning differences, that we can plan and individualize instruction for exceptional children. As Alton Lee (2003) has pointed out, effective teachers have knowledge of the nature of student learning styles, can interpret student behavior, and are responsive, creative and effective in facilitating student learning processes.

Fortunately, Montessori environments are a shift from traditional pedagogical approaches to embracing learner-centered teaching principles. Armstrong (1988) suggests that many children may not have linguistic or mathematical intelligence. They may however, be talented in music, art, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal or bodily – kinesthetic intelligences. When teachers recognize their students' strengths, they make use of these positive attributes to plan and provide appropriate instruction. For example, mathematics and language can be taught musically by song or kinesthetically through movement. Armstrong (1988) suggests that teachers can achieve the same goals by

varying their method of teaching to accommodate different learning styles. Assessments are valuable in improving both teaching and learning (Alton- Lee, 2003). By understanding learning differences, teachers can made adjustments and use differentiation strategies in their teaching approach, content of curriculum, assessment methods, classroom organization, and their interaction with individual students. (Westwood 2003, cited in Mentis et al., 2005).

Meaningful and challenging learning for students with exceptional needs

If educators recognize and appreciate learning differences in children, they would be better placed in planning meaningful and challenging learning activities. This knowledge allows them to provide students with explicit individualized instruction, and helps them plan curriculum differentiation depending on children's learning goals and objectives, strengths and areas of need.. This is especially important when a student needs to be compensated because of intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioral difficulties. For example, teachers can present specific visual, aural or tactile activities for students who have sensory difficulties, or highlight key points for students who have attention problems. A student who struggles with reading may be given cue cards for support before a reading lesson. Many diverse students need repeated concrete and tangible experiences to learn a single concept. Students who have physical disabilities may require adaptations to the classroom set-up. For example, students who have hearing impediments may benefit if the classroom has pictorial sign language information around the classroom. Students who have social or behavioral problems might benefit from peer group set ups or cooperative learning in small, well structured groups.

Jordan (2007) and Hehir (2002) discuss 'Universal Design' as a means of accommodating all students in the classroom. This concept involves designing the instructional program in such a way that there are multiple pathways for learning.. Jordan, (2007) indicates that a wider array of students will be impacted if teachers design universal and accessible instructional strategies. An example of universal design in a Montessori classroom is a pictorial representation of ongoing tasks, such as pushing in chairs or rolling mats.

Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern (2002) provide us with a unique and holistic approach to education based on their research on discouraged children from Native American backgrounds. Much of their findings replicate the Montessori philosophy of educating the whole child. They suggest that educators should seek to understand and integrate "Circle of Courage" into their classroom environments. The philosophy argues that in order for children to become successful learners and become socially acceptable, they need a sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. By integrating this philosophy into the classroom, and meeting these key needs, students are likely to become socially responsible and successful learners. They develop an inner motivation to grow and flourish in school. As a result, teachers can plan challenging and meaningful tasks that optimize outcomes for these children.

A central point in all of the above is that teachers must have an understanding of individual learning differences so that they can build skills that provide safe, meaningful and valuable learning experiences to every student in their classrooms.

Reflections on Personal and Professional Development

As teachers, all of us face new challenges every day when it comes to meeting the needs of exceptional students. My own approach has been to ask myself why some students find it difficult to learn whereas some find it effortless. What can I do to make learning fun for students who struggle or have no self-confidence in their abilities? Am I sensitive enough to the needs of all children in my classroom? How do I optimize learning outcomes for all students? I often have to evaluate and reflect on my practice so that I can effectively design and create lessons, which cater to students of differing abilities and from diverse families. Ultimately our goals as educators are to meet the needs of every child in the classroom irrespective of their learning differences.

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