

Inclusive Education Reflection

By: Emily Strand

“I want to tell you all that I know that I am very sensitive sometimes, and I’m asking you to be patient with me.” These are the words spoken by an 8 year old boy to his classmates during a student run meeting, in my Lower Elementary class a couple of years ago. As you can imagine, his words were met with an outpouring of compassion and encouragement from his peers. We are all aware that children care deeply for one another, and have a natural desire to help.

Throughout my own experiences, I have had the pleasure of witnessing how leading a class of diverse learners is good for everyone. While I have always felt this in my heart to be true, I must be honest and say I have also experienced struggles, worries, and unknowns when considering how best to meet the needs of all of these extraordinary people.

One aspect of the Montessori method that I’ve always held in high regard is the idea that above all, we respect children. All children. We have an obligation to meet them wherever they are in their developmental process, and to assist and not hinder in their self-construction. So, I knew it could be possible through a deeper understanding of the Montessori method and human development, that I could more confidently follow this commitment to children, typical and exceptional.

Before beginning the AMI Inclusive Education course at MISD last summer, I had 6 years of experience in a Montessori Elementary environment. When a colleague of mine discovered the program was being offered, I thought of my eclectic group of students and knew I wanted to be a part of it. I desired to join for the “sensitive students”, for the “full-of-endless-energy students”, for the “dyslexic students”, for the “quiet students”, and for all the others that we have met throughout the years whose path was a unique one. While I began the course with hopes of filling up my “special-needs toolbox” with tips, tricks, and how-to’s, I was about to embark on an even more meaningful process of self-reflective discovery.

Joining me on this journey was an amazing group of Montessorians, representing all levels from around the world. Participants came from 10 different countries; the furthest away was Australia, so clearly I was not alone in a search for answers about this topic. The 34 of us were met by AMI trainers, Janet McDonell and Dr. Silvia Dubovoy, in July of 2014 for the first of two summers together. The structure of the course was designed so that the students attended lectures during the morning hours from various experts, and the afternoons were reserved for group discussions about assigned and selected readings and reflections. We received lectures from Dr. Mario Salguero, a Neuropsychiatrist and Montessori spouse and parent, Dr. Lorna Swartz, a Neuropsychiatrist with a specialization in Special Education, Dr. Sharyn Rhodes, a Professor on Special Education who focuses on Language Disorders, Dr. Gary Sneag, a Vision Therapist, Dr. Edith Egar, a Holocaust survivor who spoke about stress and resilience, Dr. John F. Erhart and Monica Smith, the founders of Montessori Intervention Program in Rochester NY, Edi Nelson, an Occupational Therapist working with children, and other professionals in related fields.

We covered a wide range of important topics such as: physiology of the brain, autism/Asperger's, ADD/ADHD, sensory integration, vision and hearing, emotional and psychological disorders, and executive functions to mention just a few. During the first summer, our group focus was set on deepening our understanding of the Montessori pedagogy and how it relates to children with differences, and a large overview of many learning challenges. The second summer's focus was on collaborating together as a group to discuss Montessori and non-Montessori based interventions, and the sharing of our individual case studies. It was our work during the school year between summers to select a child with differences in a Montessori environment, to observe, collect data, then plan and implement an intervention to address a particular concern with that child. We each prepared a presentation that contained our findings, and shared them with the group. These case studies were an integral component of our own personal transformations; there were numerous epiphanies from both presenters and audience members. In addition, throughout both summers we covered an overview of the A to I course, and an in depth look at developmental psychology, while focusing on current research in neuroscience. No matter what topic was being discussed during the course, we regularly brought our attention back to what Maria Montessori has already written to keep her discoveries our main focal point.

"As I have so often said, it is true that we cannot make a genius. We can only give to each individual the chance to fulfill his potential possibilities." The Absorbent Mind, Chapter 8: The Child's Conquest of Independence.

I feel incredibly appreciative of being afforded the opportunity to delve deeper into the writings of not only Montessori, but also Andrew Solomon, John Osterkorn, Dr. Steven Hughes, Carl R. Rogers, Nimal Vaz, John Snyder, Seguin, and many others. It is clear to me that through finishing this course, my path has just started; continuing education is a mandatory part of my commitment to Montessori and children. As I reflect on this experience and list all of the topics we covered, resources we created, and people we met, I can share with you what I have learned. Did I learn some practical skills to be able to give Montessori lessons to exceptional students more effectively? Yes. Did I deepen my understanding of the fundamentals of human development? Definitely. Am I now even more connected to the principles of Montessori? Absolutely. While all of these takeaways are so valuable to me, here's what I REALLY discovered: The best and only way I can help guide a child who is showing a particular struggle, is through building an authentic relationship with them, identifying their personal strengths and interests and utilizing them whenever possible, and fostering a classroom culture of encouragement - because through strong peer relationships, that struggling child will transform. When my former student asked his peers for extra patience with him, I watched as his personal experience became our group experience, and how we all worked to support the progress together. It was a group effort, and the children led the way. I started this course hoping to find ways to help the children in my classroom, and I found out how: by becoming a transformed adult.