THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INCLUSION IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD MONTESSORI CLASSROOM

by

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Abstract

This study indicates the benefits and challenges of inclusion in an early childhood Montessori classroom. The research has been significant due to limited resources on inclusion linked to Montessori education. This study was done in a private inclusive Montessori school in an early childhood classroom. Through observations, interviews and assessments, the results of inclusion in a Montessori setting were discovered. Meaningful relationships between peers and teachers are critical in the development of the child. The prepared environment is a unique feature of an inclusive Montessori environment that enables children to learn naturally by manipulating materials in the classroom with a hands-on approach. This engages academic success. It was also found that inclusion in a Montessori setting does not work effectively for every child with a disability. To have inclusion work successfully within this classroom environment, three teachers were mandatory: Two certified Montessori teachers and one special educator. This presents a challenge because the majority of schools cannot afford this luxury. Transitions, inconsistency and too much freedom are a challenge with inclusive Montessori education. However, inclusive Montessori education will benefit children in learning acceptance and respect for humanity. Further studies should be done on this topic with larger sample sizes, longer duration of time, various disabilities and different locations.
Chapter I: Introduction

Vignette

A memory comes to mind of when I was in the second grade. Math was a challenging subject for me and I could not keep up... so I was left behind. My teacher told the students that when we completed a lengthy math page from our booklets, we could make a Christmas reindeer ornament. After an hour of hard work, I was the last to finish. The teacher then ridiculed my work and after the humiliation took place, she ultimately let me have the leftover scraps to make my ornament. I remember sitting at a round table alone not able to enjoy the company of my peers during the holidays, and crying onto the broken pieces of the reindeer. I not only felt like a failure but also saw myself as stupid. Years have passed by and yet when Christmas comes around and I hang that reindeer ornament upon my tree, I’m still haunted by this memory. However, with this nightmare of an experience, it is also a reminder of the type of teacher I strive to be every single day in my own classroom.

This disheartening tale was an example of feeling lost in school. How many other children have often felt the same way I did in school? My answer would ultimately be that there are more children than we can count feeling lost, stupid, confused, or behind. When I became an educator, I made a promise long ago that no child would feel left behind like I was. I knew back from the beginning of my education, that each individual child does not learn at the same pace—that still applies and it makes us unique. It is also a fact that we all have certain areas where we strive and areas in which we are challenged. Through this experience, and many more through my education, I took away the positive and negative teaching methods and then applied or rejected various methods
to become an effective teacher in the classroom. Although, I never realized, until my teaching journey began, how many different types of educational programs there are. We are aware of the standard public school system, and even from a young age I can recall not being interested in teaching public school. I liked the schools that had a hands-on-approach towards learning (concrete), compared to schools that did worksheet after worksheet (abstract). Private schools really are able to share a rich type of curriculum through these hands-on techniques that I was always interested in teaching. The best example of this type of education is Montessori education (Montessori, 1967).

**Montessori education.** Montessori education was something I was always interested in, but along the way overlooked this type of education. Through a teaching program offered at Westminster College, I connected once again to the method and became a certified early childhood Montessori teacher. Montessori education is unique from other types of education because it meets the needs of all children. This is a result of the teachers to student ratios, the curriculum area that is entirely hands on with a direct purpose and aim to help guide the developmental process, and a prepared environment that is a designated spot to accommodate all children (Montessori, 1967). That is why I have chosen to become a Montessori teacher and am now so passionate about this type of education. I have first-hand observed children becoming academically successful throughout the year; cooperatively working with their peers to create a sense of community in our classroom; and gaining independence, coordination, concentration and order from being in a Montessori environment.

Since my hardships with my own personal educational career, I have researched special education. These students are left behind more often than other students because
of the setting they are placed in based on a type of intervention, or no intervention at all. I believe that Montessori education is the most effective type of intervention they can gain through their school years and my study conveyed the benefits and challenges of linking inclusion and Montessori education together.

**Statement of Topic**

**Montessori method.** Montessori education was composed around inclusive education. Maria Montessori was a doctor in Italy and interested in helping children with disabilities (Montessori, 1967). In fact, Dr. Montessori was one of the first special educators of her time and created her method based on this type of education (McKenzie & Zascavage, 2012). Maria Montessori knew that these children needed more than to be assessed and kept within hospital walls (Montessori, 1967). During my training to become a Montessori teacher, my professor Lois Bobo took us into the life of Maria Montessori. We learned that after Dr. Montessori observed the children’s different behavior for a few years within the hospital she worked at. Later on she established the “Montessori Method” from these findings. She knew that if children with disabilities could learn in a prepared environment, then children without disabilities could learn in this setting as well (Montessori, 1967). Montessori then decided to open the first Montessori school Casa de Bambini in 1907 (Bobo, 2012). From the success of her first school in 1907, her educational method went mainstream around the world and other countries adapted her education into their own schools.

**Montessori and inclusion.** Linking Montessori education and inclusion strategies together in an early childhood setting is an important component for future education. My
goal is to have other schools follow this type of teaching method so each child has a chance of gaining academic achievement.

**Statement of Researcher**

I would describe myself as being an extremely creative, hardworking, honest, compassionate, independent and sociable individual. I am a visual learner and have to use my tactile sense (touch) to obtain information; concrete learning over abstract thinking. From as long as I can remember, I have always been interested in the educational field. I received my Bachelor of Science Degree from the University of Utah in Human Development and Family Studies with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education. While attending the University of Utah, I was a member of Pi Beta Phi and completed many hours of philanthropy work and worked with families that were less privileged. I am a Humanist and value each individual human being. I respect others and value who they are. I believe that everyone deserves to be educated in a way that helps him or her learn in a way that is beneficial to his or her academic success. I am obtaining my Master of Education Degree from Westminster College and strive to one-day practice teaching other educators in the Montessori method.

**Theorists.** The educators who influences me and I can relate my teaching methods to are Montessori, Seguin, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Froebel (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2012). I teach in a hands-on-approach method that I have observed to be extremely successful in the classroom. I am biased to the type of educational system that leaves anyone behind and only centered his or her assessments from testing. Children do not learn at the same pace, and my philosophy matches Montessori’s in the sense that we need to follow the individual child. Every student receives the level of education that he
or she is ready for; educators move at the child’s pace, not the systems. Montessori schools make sure to have early intervention to meet the needs at the beginning stages (Montessori, 1967). However, that being said, there are an astonishingly few amount of inclusive Montessori schools. I have the privilege of working at the first Inclusive Montessori School in the state of Utah.

**Research Questions and Framework**

**Introduction.** This action research project developed a primary research question: “What are the benefits and challenges of inclusion in an Early Childhood Montessori classroom?” Minimal research has been focused on inclusion in an early childhood Montessori classroom, so the research on this topic will be significant. I used a constructivist framework for this qualitative study that is equivalent to Montessori education. Constructivism correlates with Montessori education because it builds upon learning in a natural way (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967; Driscoll, 2005).

**Potential Significance and Limitations**

**Significance.** There is a sense of empowerment when linking the Montessori method and inclusive education together. Cossentino (2010) stated that “Montessori's legacy of personalized, inclusive education, early intervention models offer promising approaches to building both institutional and individual instructional capacity, enabling Montessori educators to more effectively follow not just the theoretical child, but all children” (p. 38). The significance of this research will be that children with special needs are not isolated by the process of being pulled out of their classroom, but rather staying in their classroom and working together with their peers in a Montessori environment. Both children with special needs and typical children will help one another accomplish goals.
of academic success. With this type of education, we are able to meet the needs of all children in a Montessori classroom. This will change the way we view education and become aware of all the possibilities of learning.

**Limitations.** Typical limitations that were presented was the small sample size of my classroom (twenty students—six with special needs); a unique setting that is not generalized to every Montessori classroom; dynamics particular to guides; not every teacher within the school are a certified Montessori teacher, has trained from the same program, or has experience with special education. Following the needs of children is a difficult task. When you are following the needs of children with special needs, this will add another level of difficulty. Collaboration between teachers, faculty, and parents needs to be a significant component for the success of inclusion in a Montessori setting. Parents are not always aware of what Montessori education has to offer, so a limitation of the study might mean that certain students are removed from the classroom setting before the study is completed and analyzed. This study is not about changing traditional public school; the focus is on inclusion in Montessori schools.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

In my experience, society overlooks Montessori education as a “simplistic daycare,” not a place to achieve a real education. But contrary to their belief, the Montessori method has now expanded worldwide (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 2004). However, being a teacher in this field, it has become apparent that the majority of current Montessori schools leave out inclusion. Why should something that was designed to help children, especially children with disabilities, be ignored in the field? What happens when we consider inclusion in an early childhood Montessori environment? And what are the strengths and challenges teachers face by having Early Childhood and inclusion linked? Through the process of reviewing literature and my research, these questions were addressed.

I used a constructivist framework for this qualitative study that is compatible to Montessori education (Odom, 2002). Constructivism correlates with Montessori education because it encourages discovery through a hands-on, experimental, collaborative way that promotes natural learning (Bobo, 2012, Odom, 2002). Driscoll (2005) states that the “Constructivist theory calls for embed [ding] learning in complex, realistic, and relevant environments” (p. 394). Montessori teachers want their students to take the main role of their building their learning, and Driscoll (2005) supports that constructivist environments encourage ownership in the learning process for all children. I have personally seen in many traditional public schools, teachers attempting to “fill an empty vessel” within their students, when in reality, children are natural learners by nature (Montessori, 1967). Constructivism helps children to gain cognitive flexibility, which enables the mind to create multiple concepts within one learning task (Driscoll,
With this framework, the idea of a partnership between learner and educator is established (Allen, 2007; Driscoll, 2005).

The different topic areas reviewed in this literature review are: Special Education and Montessori History, Current Inclusion in General Schools, Inclusion and Early Childhood Education, Barriers of Inclusive Education, Intervention in Early Childhood Settings, and Intervention and Inclusion in a Montessori Setting.

**Special Education and Montessori History**

**Montessori theory.** Inclusion was the core foundation of Dr. Maria Montessori’s education (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). McKenzie and Zascavage (2012) stated that, “Maria Montessori was one of the first special educators” (p. 32). Over the years in the educational system, special education has not been widely seen in Montessori education: “It was through my interest in deficient children that I came to know the special method of education devised by Edward Seguin, and also to investigate in a general way the treatments for various forms of abnormality” (Montessori, 2004, p. 20). It was about more than just dealing with children with disabilities and the intake of medication, as other doctors at that time thought it should be (Montessori, 2004). Dr. Montessori saw a vision of what these children needed, and that vision was education: “I differed from my colleagues in that I instinctively felt that mental deficiency was more of an educational than medical problem” (Montessori, 1967, p. 21). After working with children from the Pedagogical Institute, she realized that she was no longer suitable in the role of a physician who conducted experimental sciences to cure various abnormalities, but more as an educator:
Interest in education was born. Nothing in fact is so fascinating as to attend to the mental awakening of these children, enslaved by their own inferiority; and to witness this kind of liberation of the soul from extinction through spiritual poverty; to see them arise, reviving and opening up towards interests that give life to their intelligence; to witness the happiness that comes to them through every activity in which the hand becomes capable of achieving something. It is really man arising from death to the joy of living. This spectacle is so fascinating that it kept me for almost two years in daily contact with these children. I was with them from early morning till evening as if I were a real teacher, not a physician conducting an experiment. (Montessori, 2004, p. 21)

Montessori’s teacher Guido Paccelli, encouraged her to lecture other educators on special education (Montessori, 1967; Montessori 2004). She carried on training teachers for more than two years (Montessori, 1967). Besides learning from her teacher, Montessori created several theories based on previous theorists of education (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). The theorists included Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky (Bobo, 2012; Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). Maria Montessori “believed that children learn best by direct sensory experience. She was further convinced that children have a natural tendency to explore and understand their world” (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2012, p. 8).

**Prepared environment.** Montessori created an environment that produced hands-on learning through a *prepared environment* specially designed to meet the specific needs of children through the variety of materials, the classroom structure, and the overall appeal of the environment which engages natural learning (Bobo, 2012; Gargiulo &
Kilgo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). Mixed-age groupings create a natural peer tutoring opportunities (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). Individualized curriculum, compatible for children with or without disabilities, is composed of works, each of which has a designated purpose (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010). They are developmentally appropriate and meets every child’s individualized needs (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010; Mckenzie & Zascavage, 2012). Using real objects, instead of toy replications, helps develop functional skills and the development of independence (Bobo, 2012; Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). Children are able to make choices that are based on their interests from the variety of materials in each area of the classroom; this promotes freedom and independence (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010; Montessori, 1967; Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2012). Lillard (2013) argues that in traditional classrooms, we often see young children expected to sit and listen to lessons without interacting with their peers:

Such an approach to learning belies the principles of constructivism that much research on human learning shows to be effective. In fact, many educators now call for one constructivist approach in particular, playful learning, as a developmentally appropriate alternative to didactic instruction (Fisher et al., 2011)—as a way to help preschoolers learn in the ways they naturally learn. Along a line running from free play (in which children play independently), through guided play (where an adult oversees and gently directs—or scaffolds—their play), to didactic instruction (where a teacher directly instructs children), playful learning occupies the span between free play and guided play. (p. 157)

While reviewing the topics of special education and Montessori education, it becomes apparent that the two are actually one in the same— they are linked. Yet an
inclusive Montessori school is a rare institute in society. This study will help identify the cause of this, and perhaps one day this type of schooling will become more widely used.

**Current Inclusion in General Schools**

In order to better understand inclusion in Montessori schools, it is necessary to first address the inclusion that takes place currently in traditional schools. But how much do we truly understand about inclusion? Through the literature review, it is evident that researchers are constantly studying current inclusion methods in general educational settings (Bricker, 2000; Foote, Kilanowaski-Press & Rinaldo, 2010; Kline, O’Conner, Vakil, & Welton, 2008). Bricker’s (2000) research stated that, “over the years, the debate and practice of inclusion has become paramount to both special and general education communities” (as cited in McLeskey, Henry, & Axelrod, 1999). Foote et al. (2010) supports Bricker’s (2000) research on current inclusion, and applied it further: “Inclusive special education has become common in schools throughout the United States as a result of PL 94-142 and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) amendments to this legislation (IDEA, USDOE, 2004)” (p.44). While Bricker (2000) and Foote et al. (2010) explain that inclusive education is becoming not only familiar, but common, Foote et al. (2010) adds that:

> Despite federal mandates propelling the inclusion movement in the United States, relatively little has been done to explore the current state of inclusive practice in terms of service models most often employed and other relevant classroom characteristics including number of students with disabilities, training experiences of educators, and other available educational support persons. (p. 44)
To create awareness of inclusive education, we start within the walls of an inclusive school (Bricker, 2000; Foote et al., 2010; Kline et al., 2008). Kline et al. (2008) focused on the role of the early childhood educator who works with young children with autism in their classroom. They observed a child who was not meeting the benchmarks he should have met in the curriculum during developmental stages. The strategies used were: structured play (language and social skills were shown), positive behavioral supports and a weekly progress report to the child’s mother (Kline et al., 2008, p. 321). Progress reports, assessments, and observations to share with parents will be beneficial when communicating with the child’s family (Bobo, 2012; Bricker 2000; Kline et al., 2008). You will have access to documented data to review with the school administrators and district as well (Bobo, 2012). An Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is used for children with disabilities will also help as different type of assessment that helps the child on a personal level was used to help the developmental process of functional skills, communication, and academics (Foote et al., 2010; Kline et al., 2008; Odom, 2002). Teachers, school administrators, and parents need to look at the child’s individual needs to establish the IEP; this will help the program to work effectively (Foote et al., 2010; Kline et al., 2008).

It is emphasized that all children should be allowed within the classroom environment (Bricker, 2000; Foote et al., 2010; Kline et al., 2008). Therefore, instead of pulling children out of their classroom, it is important to consider how combining strategies with IEPs could enhance a child’s developmental process within the classroom environment (Foote et al., 2010; Kline et al. 2008). Through collaboration, teacher/parent involvement, and IEPs made to complete developmental goals prearranged, inclusion
within a classroom becomes a fundamental component to the learning equation (Bricker 2000; Foote et al., 2010; Kline et al., 2008).

As educators, we can apply the goals of the IEPs, interventions, and the information we have on inclusion researched by Bricker (2000), Foote et al. (2010) and Kline et al. (2008) to learn more about this type of education.

**Inclusion in Early Childhood Education**

Through research, inclusion has shown many significant components in an early childhood classroom within these topic areas: Peer and teacher collaboration; creating a high functioning learning community; and parent, teacher, and other faculty member involvement, are significant ways to ensure success within an inclusive early childhood classroom (Allen, 2007; Bobo, 2012; Beresford, Erwin, Evenson, & Puig, 2012; Brotherson, Chu, Erwin, Haines, Maude, McGrath, & Zheng, 2013; Montessori, 1967; Odom, 2002; Ogelman & Secer, 2012).

**Collaboration.** Successful learning is a result of peer collaboration, as well as teacher interaction, is in early childhood classrooms (Bobo; 2012, Montessori, 1967; Odom, 2002; Ogelman et al., 2012). Currently, in inclusive preschool classrooms, children are grouped in small-group activities. Both children with or without disabilities spend time with one another as they do circle times, manipulation with fine motor skills, transitions, etc. (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967; Odom, 2002; Ogelman et al., 2012). Ogelman et al. (2012) studied the effects that inclusive education practices have on the peer relations of 5-6 year olds with typical development. Results of this study concluded that inclusion:
Has a positive effect on the level of aggression, pro-social behavior, asocial behavior, and victimization, which are related to peer relations, and interpersonal skills, anger management skills and adaptation to change, self-control skills and task completing skills, which are social skill variables. (Ogelman et al., 2012, p. 169)

Children with disabilities are also spending more time with an adult to gain one-on-one attention (Bricker, 2000; Foote et al., 2010; Odom, 2002; Ogelman et al., 2012). This certainly benefits students because teachers’ meet the needs of students so that no child is left behind (Bobo, 2012; Odom, 2002). Brotherson et al. (2013) then created a system of collaboration that looked at peer relationships. The system starts with the *Foundations Model*, which establishes the intention that all basic foundational skills, for developing self-determination in later life, require young children with disabilities to gain skills in making choices and problem solving, self-regulation and engagement with others (Brotherson et al., 2013).

**High functioning learning community.** Building a high functioning learning community in the classroom creates mutual respect, social opportunities, and academic achievement (Beresford et al., 2012; Brotherson et al., 2013; Ogelman et al., 2012; Odom, 2002). Participatory Action Research (PAR) was done in a study by Beresford et al. (2012) which is an “approach as a way of minimizing the disparity between what we learn through research and how we can use this information to produce positive outcomes in immediate and meaningful ways” (p. 17). The research indicates by keeping the students together, instead of pulling out children with disabilities, a sense of community is built within the classroom (Beresford et al., 2012; Brotherson et al., 2013; Odom,
Building this type of community in the classroom benefits everyone. Respect is established in the classroom setting and the children will have respect not only for their teachers, but also their peers and families (Beresford et al., 2012; Brotherson et al., 2013; Odom, 2002; Ogelman et al., 2012).

**Teacher and parent involvement.** To build academic success in the classroom environment, parents, faculty and students need to be involved (Allen, 2007; Beresford et al., 2012; Bobo, 2012; Odom, 2002). The most significant type of involvement for maintaining a successful learning environment is participation from the teacher and parents (Allen, 2007; Beresford et al., 2012; Bobo, 2012; Odom, 2002). When teachers do routines each day in the classroom, whether it is greeting in the morning, circle-times that guide participation and learning, engaging in daily discussions, sharing information about our families, and working one-on-one with the students, it creates a welcoming atmosphere in the environment (Allen, 2007; Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967; Odom, 2002).

Having more than one teacher in a classroom is a type of involvement that is seen within inclusive classrooms as well as Montessori classrooms (Bobo, 2012; Beresford et al., 2012; Cossentino, 2010; Odom, 2002). Beresford et al. (2012) explained why it is essential to have several teachers in an inclusive classroom: “One of the side benefits of an inclusive environment—there are all these extra staff that have incredible expertise that normally you would never get in a regular day care setting” (p. 22). Many schools do not have the luxury of having more than one teacher in the classroom, as a result, the children are not getting the attention they deserve and so desperately need (Bobo, 2012; Odom, 2002).
Parents need to be a part of the school and more importantly the classroom of their child (Allen, 2007; Bobo, 2012). This will help establish a strong relationship not only between the child and their parent, but a sense of collaboration between the teacher and the child’s family; this is crucial to successful academic learning (Allen, 2007; Bobo, 2012; Bricker, 2000; Odom, 2002). However, for this type of involvement to occur, teachers must make an effort to create opportunities in which involvement can be established (Allen, 2007; Bobo, 2012; Bricker, 2000). In Allen’s (2007) book *Creating Welcoming Schools*, teachers learn how to make the first step of a partnership with parents. The *Funds of Knowledge* is a way to connect your students’ “home learning” and “school learning” into one concrete establishment (Allen, 2007, p. 43). Additionally, Allen (2007) stated that:

*All families have important experiences, skills, and bodies of knowledge. These funds are essential to the ways the families’ function in the home as well as in work and community settings. They are also resources for their children that the teacher can tap into…Teachers learn about how children learn.* (p. 47, as cited in Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005)

By connecting with these families, everyone in the classroom setting will benefit (Allen, 2007; Beresford, et al., 2012; Bobo, 2012; Odom, 2002). Parents will look past stereotypes they have heard about inclusive education, and appreciate the benefits this type of education can bring (Beresford, et al., 2012; Odom, 2002). A mother of a preschooler with disabilities stated this regarding inclusive education:

*I really like that everything is matter of fact. The fact that my son doesn’t talk as well as other kids—The other kids don’t even really pay attention. It may be a*
little harder for them to understand him sometimes but [he’s] just their friend. And that’s the beauty of inclusion too. That it’s dual-fold. The child in need has a model, which he desperately needed, but in turn the other children become tolerant and accepting of differences and don’t see them as different. That’s just the way [he] is. (Beresford, et al., 2012, p. 17)

Peer collaboration; creating a high functioning learning community; and parent, teacher, and other faculty member involvement are vitally important areas that help make inclusion in early childhood classroom successful for everyone involved (Beresford, et al., 2012; Bobo, 2012, Bricker, 2000; Brotherson et al., 2013; Montessori, 1967; Odom, 2002; Ogelman et al., 2012).

**Barriers of Inclusive Education**

**School settings.** Although there are numerous benefits to inclusive education, barriers become present among teachers, classrooms, and parents (Bricker, 2000; Foote et al., 2010; Fuchs, 2010; Odom, 2002; Watson, 2009). Several of these barriers include the fact that teachers need to spend more time attending to special needs students, there can be quite a waitlist to enroll into the school, severity of disability, and cost of tuition (Watson, 2009). Foote et al. (2010) supported the research by Watson (2009) by stating that “other common concerns leading to less than positive perceptions toward mainstreaming students with disabilities include the size of the class, severity of disability, teaching experience, and grade level” (as cited in Weddell, 2005). Looking at the developmental age between the children is a crucial factor towards social acceptance (Bricker, 2000; Fuchs, 2010; Watson, 2009). Bricker (2000) found that “children tend to be placed by chronological rather than developmental age; therefore, children with
disabilities may be physically as well as developmentally mismatched with other children in the class” (p. 17).

**Teacher biases.** Barriers with inclusion can lie within school settings. Teachers are capable of keeping the balance in the classroom, however, if they are feeling negative towards inclusion, it can create a downward spiral (Bricker, 2000; Fuchs, 2010; Watson, 2009). Bricker (2000) expresses that even though there are many positive aspects of inclusion, that creating successful inclusion within school settings can be complex. Fuchs’ (2010) research has shown that numerous reports have shown that “as many as 75% of the teacher participants believed that inclusion would not succeed and were not in favor of inclusion” (as cited in Monahan, 1997; Ross & Wax, 1993; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). This perplexing percentage might be a result of:

The quality of the instruction and the social interactions that occur in these settings is often contrary to best practice. That is, the child with a disability does not always receive specialized training or handling and/or is isolated or treated differently by both staff and children. (Bricker, 2000, p. 16; as cited in Hughes, 1992)

Perhaps we need to look deeper at the teachers and how they approach the students as well as the classroom environment. Research by Watson (2009) supports Bricker’s (2000) research when stating that barriers become visible when adding inclusion into a school setting:

Although access to mainstream environments has improved, lack of capacity at multiple levels within the system to provide resources to enhance the habitus of teaching personnel and parents and to meet the special education needs of pupils
with intellectual and/or pervasive developmental disabilities impedes access to enrollments in mainstream primary education environments. (p. 277)

Are these schools meeting the developmental needs of children with special needs? Both Watson (2009) and Bricker (2000) examine that inclusive education was not meeting the needs of these students. Can inclusion benefit all children? Bricker (2000) states that successful inclusion was not established because it wasn’t anticipated that:

(a) Teachers and parents who did not support the idea or practice of inclusion, (b) special educators and other professional personnel who saw inclusion as a mechanism to remove support and resources from children with disabilities, (c) programs without adequately trained staff or resources to meet the individual needs of children, and (d) the rise of a national controversy related to inclusive practice. (p. 17)

**Parent awareness.** Public schools/general education are exceedingly well known and the most common type of schooling environment in society. However, with this in mind, is it necessarily the route parents should consider when looking at education options for their children with disabilities? Are they receiving a proper and enriched learning experience? From the survey questionnaire conveyed by Watson (2009), it was found that parents, whom were not currently enrolling their children in an inclusive setting, had a non-existent knowledge of special education. And among those parents, “less than 20% of respondents indicated that they have an understanding of their children’s rights” (p. 279). This statement was very troublesome to read. It is imperative that parents have an understanding of their children’s rights, especially if they want them to achieve academic success. It is unfortunate that the experience parents have with
special education is practically non-existent. However, in comparison to Watson’s (2009) research, Bricker (2000) notes that some parents are aware of inclusion:

Parents may have had little choice about placing their children who do not have disabilities in a program that includes children with disabilities. Parents may be concerned about the effect children with disabilities will have on the class or on their child. (p. 17)

The majority of schools are not helping the parents to understand the benefits that inclusion can bring. Bricker’s (2000) evidence suggests that schools:

May have little incentive or information to counter parental fears because of their own feelings of uncertainty in dealing with children with particular delays or deficits. The outcome may be a classroom climate that is not conductive to successful integration. (p. 17)

Collaboration between educators. Communication among school staff needs to be established to maintain a successful atmosphere (Fuchs, 2010). Brotherson et al. (2013) researched collaboration between the educators and found it to be a significant component, along with collaboration among the students, and Odom (2002) expanded on Brotherson et al. (2013) research further by coming up with seven effective tools to decrease the barriers in inclusive classrooms: Joint participation in program development, shared philosophy and instructional approaches, shared “ownership” of the children, communication between the adults, changing professional roles, stability in relationships, and administrative support (p. 83-85). Besides the seven collaboration tools, interventions can help guide those involved. Interventions will help inclusion work efficiently and effectively in early childhood classrooms (Ergenekon & Ozen, 2011). Bricker (2000)
concludes the research done on barriers, by expressing how to improve inclusion for the future:

We need a clearly articulated set of outcomes for all children who participate in inclusive programs…I believe a national discussion refocused from the general goals of inclusion to specific child-based outcomes would do much to solidify best practice around inclusion. (p. 18)

**Intervention in Early Childhood Settings**

There are systematic approaches when working in special education and interventions that can be beneficial to the process (Chandler, Christensen, Dinnebeil, & Stayton, 2012; Ergenekon & Ozen, 2011). Chandler et al. (2012) did field validation surveys to explore the personnel standards that are used in the educational systems for accountability and in the preparation program for training highly qualified teachers, which will lead to accreditation. The studies’ purpose is improving the organizational function of standards in special education and early intervention.

However, we need to look beyond the standards of education so we can then look at the process of interventions. Ergenekon and Ozen (2011) reinforced Chandler’s et al. (2012) research findings. They studied teaching practices in natural settings such as activity-based intervention (ABI) that suggested alternatives to be used in effective early childhood education. In Ergeneson and Ozen’s (2011) study, ABI is defined as an intervention that helps “children to choose activities according to the child’s interests, teaching individual goals embedded in routines and planned activities, teaching functional and generalizable skills, and using before and after behavior stimuli which have natural and meaningful relations with behaviors and environment (as cited in
Bricker & Pretti-Frontczak, 2004, p. 360). The benefits of using ABI within instructional settings provide children with multiple-practice opportunities, teach skills within the framework of daily routines without further need for any extra activity, focus on children’s interests and their motivation, and enhancing the level of academic success (Ergenekon & Ozen, 2011).

**Intervention and Inclusion in a Montessori Classroom**

**Inclusion methods.** Intervention included in an inclusive setting, is beneficial to children with special needs; add together components into a Montessori classroom, and we will see significant changes (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010; Mckenzie & Zascavage, 2012; Montessori, 1967; Vettiveloo; 2008). This is because the Montessori method was founded from a special education perspective (Montessori, 1967). Cossentino (2010) supports the practice of early intervention and Montessori education (Montessori, 1967). Cossentino (2010) stated that: “Montessori's legacy of personalized, inclusive education, early intervention models offer promising approaches to building both institutional and individual instructional capacity; enabling Montessori educators to more effectively follow not just the theoretical child, but all children” (p. 38). Mckenzie and Zascavage (2012) added to Cossentino’s (2010) study by sharing the criteria needed for effective instruction (specifically focusing on students with special needs) and shall be detailed below.

**Instruction.** For proper instruction, teachers need to include the following areas of attention: Scope and Sequence, Curriculum, Pacing, and Types of Learning (Bobo, 2012; Mckenzie & Zascavage, 2012). These areas of instruction can be found in a Montessori setting, and Mckenzie and Zascavage, (2012) explain where and how to
approach it. This study relates to my research because it validates the empowerment of the Montessori method and inclusive education. By connecting both early intervention and inclusion into the classroom, we are able to meet the needs of all children.


Teaching methods for delivering the curriculum known to be effective with children who have learning difficulties, such as direct instruction or explicit teaching, the mastery learning approach and the materials approach are used and carried out for all children, irrespective of capability and ability. (p. 179)

These teaching methods, in which Vettiveloo (2008) analyzes, shows correlation with the “trajectories of Montessori education and special education, particularly early intervention, intersect in important ways” (Cossentino, 2010, p. 39). For each child, there is a specific order in the way they are taught—the Montessori method follows their needs entirely (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). Every material was designed for a specific direct goal to help the educational and developmental process within the child (Bobo, 2012; McKenzie & Zascavage, 2012; Montessori, 1967). The Montessori method was in fact created for children with special needs; from the materials, the presentations that are given, to the prepared environment—it was specifically designed to accommodate their interests, give motivation, and for the students to gain social and academic achievement (Cossentino, 2010; McKenzie & Zascavage, 2012; Montessori, 1967).
**Individual evaluation plans.** Vettiveloo’s (2008) describes the difference between Kline et al. (2008) concerning IEPs: “The essential difference between inclusion and the Montessori philosophy lies in the fact that the development of formal IEPs for a period of even one month is not advised. This is because the child’s ‘inner guide’ may not be in sync with what the teacher has planned for the child” (p. 179). This statement by Vettiveloo (2008) is problematic; IEPs are very important when helping children with learning disabilities as Kline et al. (2008) expressed. However, Montessori education follows the children’s needs in a different way. Implementing IEPs can be done, but we have to look at what the Montessori education method, as a whole, brings to the child. Having one or the other can create a barrier, but so can the process of adding IEPs in a Montessori classroom.

**Teacher collaboration and training.** Being in an inclusive Montessori classroom, I have seen the challenges of this firsthand, but I’ve also seen the progress the children are making. Perhaps the collaboration and communication among teachers, can establish a solid groundwork in which this category of education will payoff. Foote et al. (2010) examined the concept of co-teaching, which clarifies there are several teachers within a classroom (Montessori, 2004). Foote et al. (2010) identified that: “Co-teaching, though frequently cited as the most beneficial model of inclusive practice, emerged as the least documented method of instruction, with the utilization of consultant teacher models emerging as the most prevalent” (p. 43). Although the research about teachers by Foote et al. (2010) is accurate, it seems to be directed towards a general educational setting, whereas Bobo (2012) argued that the collaboration between co-teachers makes a successful Montessori classroom. Collaboration between co-teachers is widely
recognized among Montessorians (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010; McKenzie & Zascavage, 2012).

To establish this type of collaboration between teachers, training is critical (Bobo, 2012; Brotherson et al., 2013; Cossentino, 2010; Odom, 2002). Vettiveloo (2008) examined the importance of teacher education on incorporating special education into an early childhood setting:

In the future it is planned that teachers will be trained to cater to the needs of all children within the given early childhood setting. Additional formal training in special education can also be incorporated into the teacher training programs. It is also said that one system of education will be more cost-effective in the long term. (p. 179)

Cossentino (2010) takes Vettiveloo’s (2008) study a step further to correlate teacher training with Montessori education by pointing out “historically, Montessori theory and practice have influenced the development of special education pedagogy. In some cases, as in Ireland, Montessori training and special education training have been explicitly combined” (p. 39).

So the findings in Cossentino’s (2010) research are showing us that teacher education connecting both the method and special education are already moving one step closer to one another in the way Vettiveloo (2008) states would happen in the future.

**Education system.** The foundation of Montessori education is paved with a variety of educational methods that will help each child succeed in their own way (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010; Montessori, 1967). The educational system needs to become
open to these changes. Inclusive Montessori education can be the future of learning.

Vettiveloo (2008) wanted to achieve change in Malaysia’s education system:

By the implementation of an early childhood inclusive curriculum (based on Montessori), it is hoped that early childhood inclusion will pave the way for an immediate re-examination of the…educational system in order to incorporate a diverse body of learners and achieve full inclusion throughout the educational system. (p. 180)

I want to create this type of change in the United States education system. However, the question still remains: Can inclusion work in an early childhood Montessori classroom? I am fortunate enough to be in an inclusive early childhood Montessori classroom this year. So in time, I was able to clearly identify the benefits and challenges of inclusive Montessori education.
Chapter III: Methods and Design

Approach and Rationale

My study is an action research qualitative examination of classroom inclusion practices for special needs students within an early childhood Montessori setting. Rallis and Rossman (2012) define action research as a process which “involves analysis, reflection, taking action, assessing the effect of those actions, further reflection leading to new action…practitioners may study their own practice in order to improve it” (p. 17). I conducted this study within my own classroom to determine the benefits and challenges of inclusion in an early childhood Montessori setting. When challenges were presented, modifications to improve inclusion in this particular setting were recorded and applied. Mills (2007) summarizes that when teachers are involved within this teacher action research project, then the participants will benefit as well as the guide—that is what I accomplished with my research:

One of the outcomes of action research is that it satisfies the desire of all teachers to increase the predictability of what happens in their classrooms—in particular, to increase the likelihood that a given curriculum, instructional strategy, or use of technology will positively affect student outcomes. (p. 15)

The framework for this study is constructivism because it is in line with Montessori education through a hands-on, experimental, collaborative way that promotes natural learning (Driscoll, 2005). When researching the topic of Inclusive Education in Montessori schools, there was an alarming small amount of references available. I have begun to fill the gaps of the literature limitation to help future educators become more knowledgeable on the subject. I attempted to expand and link together the two types of
educational programs to make one concrete study. I am hoping with this study, I will empower society and address any concerns within an institution.

**Setting**

The setting of this study took place in the school where I work. The school is an Inclusive Montessori School that is known as Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE). This school was created for the owner’s daughter who has Down syndrome. The goal was to create a school that included every child, no matter what disability they might have. They saw that Montessori education encourages learning and moves at the child’s own pace, which they believed, would benefit all children (Cossentino, 2010). There are special services such as a psychological therapist, music therapy and a speech specialist available at the school.

My study was conducted within an Early Childhood Montessori Classroom that has students from the ages three-six. Each classroom within the school has several children with special needs enrolled. The students are grouped in mixed-age classrooms within the school—two toddler classes (ages one-three), one emerging class (ages three-four), three early childhood classes (ages three-six), two lower elementary classes (ages six-nine), and one upper elementary class (ages nine-twelve).

This is a private school with certain features of a school within the Granite School District—lunch system, days off match with public school, etc. About half the students reside in the middle to upper middle-class neighborhoods that surround the school.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were my students’ ages three-six years old within my classroom (early childhood class). In my classroom there are twenty children;
included are my students who have these particular disabilities: Down syndrome, delayed speech, Verbal Apraxia, ADD/ADHD, and Autism. There are three teachers in my classroom: my co-teacher and I, whom are both Montessori trained, but from different trainings—American Montessori Society (AMS) and Montessori Educational Programs International (MEPI)—and have our degree in Early Childhood Education, and one special educator with a degree in Special Education. The interviews conducted for this study, were done on the Montessori teacher and the special educator in my classroom.

Data Gathering Methods

**Observation.** Observation was the most significant method of collected data for this study. This was done on children in my own classroom; documenting, conducting, and recording assessments; and noting reflections throughout the process. I monitored and made running records of verbal and nonverbal interactions in the environment by presenting myself as the passive observer. This was a critical way to scope out the entire classroom and to take recordings of what is occurring in the Montessori setting. In my classroom I have several teachers, so being a passive observer was my main focus.

However, my role was to also be an active participant observer and to record daily tasks in my classroom. I supervised the outcomes of my teaching methods and adjusted the curriculum slightly (Mills, 2007). There were circumstances and opportunities to observe when the children were in music, the art studio, dance, P.E., the media center, etc. I had to “withdraw, stand back, and watch what is happening during a particular teaching episode, moving in and out of the role of teacher, aide, and observer” (Mills, 2007, p. 85). This then expands the active participant observer into the *privileged*, active
observer role (Mills, 2007). So throughout the study, I participated in many forms of observation.

**Interviews.** An additional method in the data analysis was informal interviews with interactions engaged towards other teachers in early childhood classrooms. I interviewed the special educator within my classroom as well as an early childhood Montessori teacher with several years of experience in Montessori education. Feedback from these sources is a component that was significant when examining benefits and challenges of inclusion within this setting.

**Assessments.** I collected data throughout the research process to show the progress of the students throughout the school year by using student assessments that will be conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the year to map out progress. These assessments are Montessori Teacher Based and we designed it to plan out the levels of success in core curriculum areas such as mathematics and language arts. We also document progress by using an Internet system called Montessori Records Xpress (MRX) that helps the teacher plan and record the level of development on each curriculum.

**Journaling.** Reflection journaling was a recording asset, mainly for my benefit, while conducting my observations as well as interviews and any other essential information in the process. I chose journaling because as Mills (2007) suggests “journals can represent an ongoing attempt by teachers to systematically reflect on their practice by constructing a narrative that honors the unique and powerful voice of the teachers’ language” (p. 70).

**Media.** Audio recording and photographs were used for journaling and observation purposes. This helped to “capture classroom events and interactions” (Mills,
Data Analysis

Data analysis is important to reflect upon throughout the study and my data analysis is cumulative. Mills (2007) states “we can and should take time to analyze our data during the study to decide whether what we are learning is what we had hoped to learn” (p. 130). I reflected a lot throughout the process, especially when gathering impactful data. This happened by “consciously pausing during the investigation will allow you to reflect on what you are attending to and what you are leaving out” (Mills, 2007, p. 131). Interviews were a significant element to obtain results of inclusion in a Montessori classroom. Transcripts were involved when reviewing interviews; this resulted in an “in-depth, intimate knowledge and examination of the data that allows teacher researchers to categorize themes and ideas that will contribute to their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (Mills, 2007, p. 137).

Accomplishing a rich-conversation with teachers and parents on inclusive education in a Montessori setting is fundamentally important to this research.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To be sure that validity and rigor was present in my study, triangulation of data sources were used. Rossman and Rallis (2012) define as triangulation as:

Multiple sources of data, multiple points in time, or a variety of methods are used to build the picture that you are investigating. This helps ensure that you have not studied only a fraction of the complexity that you seek to understand. (p. 65)
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My study has gone on for a year, so this prolonged engagement is a method that ensured validity. During that time, I used multiple sources of data: Observations, interviews, assessments, photographs and video recordings, and a reflection journal.

During the research process, I used the guidance of critical friends that helped to support the research along the way. This critical friend helped watch as I modified “design decisions, develop possible analytic categories, and help build an explanation for the phenomenon of interest” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 65). I have several Montessori professors that guided me throughout the study, multiple teachers that went through AMS training with me and now work in this same field, and the assistance of the special educator and co-teacher within my classroom. Along the lines of using a critical friend, I used my school as a community of practice. This type of practice was used to promote communication in rich-detailed discussions with my other colleagues (other Montessori teachers and special educators) so that ideas on the method of inclusive Montessori education were hypothesized and evaluated in a trusting approach (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 65).

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, I maintained ethical awareness. The role of ethics in my action research guaranteed that the individuals with whom I observed, interviewed, and interacting with, are well respected (Mills, 2007). Knowledge of this research project was presented to the Head of School and the other administrators at the start. The participants are my students as well as my colleagues and parents. We have a strong, open and well-respected relationship with one another. They understand that with my study, new understandings have shed light on a new type of educational system. My
students are my priority and the study had an i.e. do no harm principal. Names of my participants and students were changed to pseudonyms to uphold ethical consideration and trustworthiness within the study.

**Conclusion**

This study was meant to fill the gap between inclusive education and Montessori education. I have accomplished in linking the two, to present a new way of teaching successful education in a developmentally appropriate environment that already fulfills the needs of every child.
Chapter IV: Data Analysis & Findings

Through my research, I uncovered the Montessori principles that are connected with inclusive education. By linking the two together, the purpose of this study was to consider whether this type of education is suitable not only for typical children, but children with disabilities as well. By using a constructivist theory approach, I was able to observe my students in a setting in which children learn naturally (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). The role of the teacher is to set up a prepared environment with an enrichment of materials to help guide the children in a specific route (Bobo, 2012).

Through this chapter, I will analyze several themes that will be supported by a collection of data from this action research project. The main themes that were presented throughout the study are the following:

- Meaningful relationships
- Collaboration
- The Prepared Environment

These themes were relevant throughout the data collection and made a solid study and indicate the benefits and challenges of inclusion in a Montessori setting. This study is significant because Montessori education was composed around inclusive education (Montessori, 1967; McKenzie & Zascavage, 2012). There is limited research on this topic, and with the data collected, others will become more aware of inclusive Montessori education.

Meaningful Relationships

Peer to peer. Through the data collected and analyzed for this research, I discovered that peer interaction, collaboration and building friendships are the foundation
of: natural learning; feeling accepted; and becoming confident, social and independent. In an inclusive Montessori setting, being accepted is developmentally significant. A child needs to know that even though we are all different, we should be respected because we are unique. Acceptance is shown everyday in an inclusive early childhood Montessori setting. Labels are not attached to children here. For example, whenever Madison, a child with Down syndrome, walks into our classroom my students rush over to greet her. They love Madison. To them, she is not different. A. Smith, the special educator that was interviewed for this study, states:

There are real friendships here. Everyone cares for one another and helps each other. It is such an amazing thing to witness children coming together and helping each other naturally. We see our typical children and special needs students working together and learning together on a daily basis. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

There is equality shown and the children learn from one another. The mixed-age groupings of children are something unique about a Montessori setting. Mixed-age groupings (three-year groupings) create natural peer-mentoring opportunities (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). In my classroom, I see the third year students helping our first year students. One particular third year student, who is a peer-mentor in our classroom, has helped our students with special needs. He has particularly helped a child who has a Verbal Apraxia which A. Smith defined Verbal Apraxia with this child as “knowing the words he wants to say…has extreme difficulty producing them. Usually produces two word utterances” (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014). The peer-mentor will give the child with the disability lessons on language, math, science and art everyday. We never
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requested the peer-mentor to do this—he began doing this on his own. The mentor’s guide their peers with snack, the classroom rules, lessons on grace and courtesy, and lessons on the different works on the shelf. This provides our older students with confidence and our younger students with a sense of feeling comfortable in this environment. I asked A. Smith what a benefit to having inclusion in a Montessori classroom was:

It promotes that confidence. Our children walk into this classroom and they are treated the same as everyone else. It promotes that community of children working together. The thing that is so beautiful about it is that it is happening naturally. The children do not see a difference in each other. They work together; they love each other, ad they have real friends here. And I have never, ever, seen that anywhere else…at any school. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

It has been observed, that our special needs students learn from the examples of our typical students and vise versa. A. Smith continued by affirming:

Many of our students, if they were in conventional schools, would be placed in a self-contained classroom; they would only be in a class with other children with disabilities. They would not be challenged nearly as much as our students who are in a classroom with typical students. They are held to certain expectations. This is so important to learn this type of independence at a young age. This growth that is established is really a result of what they see daily from their peers. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

However, challenges can arise within peer-to-peer relationships. I observed typical students not wanting to interact with children with disabilities. It was not clear the
reasoning behind this, but they were unwilling to be social with these students on more than one occasion. A few typical children in my classroom will always blame a child with a disability for particular situations in the classroom. They will tattle and say it was this child’s fault. I have observed countless times to see why this is, and I think it comes down to communication. The child with the disability is unable to communicate what he wants, so often, he will become physical with his peers. This really upsets the other students. Over time, it has become tiresome to the typical students. Friendship building lessons have helped slightly, but it just shows that some friendships are easy to establish in an inclusive Montessori setting, but not always.

Children will often become annoyed with one another when trying to work. I observed a child with a disability knock over another child’s work that they had spent all morning on. The child, whose work was now on the floor, would cry and get frustrated from this situation. This situation happens on a daily basis. We cannot control how our students with special needs will act in an inclusive setting, and that can be a challenge.

Even though there are often challenges between peers, the benefits are overwhelmingly significant. This type of growth, independence, friendship, mentoring and acceptance is really shows what a meaningful relationship between peers can do for children.

**Teacher-to-child. Benefits.** In an inclusive Montessori setting, children with disabilities are spending more time with an adult to gain one-on-one attention (Bricker, 2000; Foote et al., 2010; Odom, 2002; Ogelman et al., 2012). The most significant relationship in a Montessori classroom is the relationship between the teacher and the child. A unique trait of a Montessori setting is the one-on-one attention children will
receive from lessons from their teacher (Bobo, 2012). In a conventional school, a teacher positions in front of a their class and they instruct their students that way. In our classroom, we have two Montessori teachers giving lessons at a time, while another teacher is the rover. The rover is monitoring the classroom and assisting the children. I have reflected that this two-down/one-up method benefits the order of the classroom.

Montessori teachers understand how important the method of a hands-on approach is, as well as the one-on-one presentation the children receive. By doing this, I am able to observe and record the progress of my students. If the child cannot comprehend the material’s direct aim, purpose of the lesson (Bobo, 2012), then I immediately re-evaluate where the child needs to be academically in a developmentally appropriate manner. I have noted, that in an inclusive setting, this type of relationship is the main component of supporting the child. I move at the child’s own pace—not moving them ahead or behind until they are ready (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010). This is the greatest benefit of having inclusion in a Montessori setting: one-on-one time with the teacher. I have observed numerous times that every child requires it because not every child in my classroom learns at the same pace. In my classroom, a third year student is barely able to do beginning counting. Another third year student is on multiplication problems. The two children are the same age, but not at the same level academically. C. Young, an early childhood Montessori teacher at my school, believes that “when we follow the children, we are meeting these goals and it is what they need to academically find success for their future” (Individual Interview, February 4, 2014).

During this study I discovered through observations if the concept of the material was connecting in their mind. I then took a step back and focused more on the area that
they needed. It is a benefit of inclusion for my students to repeat and practice in order to achieve progress (Bobo, 2012). Working one-on-one daily with my student with Verbal Apraxia, I realized that a lesson on the Sandpaper Letters was not meeting his language need. Instead, I started doing Zoophonics with him, which is not a Montessori material. Zoophonics promotes phonemic awareness with sound letter recognition. The moment I worked with him on Zoophonics, I observed that he grasped the concept of letter recognition. The one-to-one interaction supported my approach for this child. This relationship I built with him was so rewarding. His whole attitude towards school, family and me changed drastically. That in my opinion is a true meaningful relationship, and a benefit of inclusion in a Montessori setting.

Challenges. Unfortunately, not all schools are fortunate enough to have three teachers in the classroom. Without three teachers there would be many challenges. If schools can only have two teachers in a classroom, then there needs to be a balance with the ratio of typical to special needs students. However, even with three teachers, C. Young said inclusion could make this one-to-one interaction quite difficult on the teacher’s part:

I feel like I have to be everywhere at once sometimes. If I am not helping Madison (child with Down syndrome), then I am ignoring one of our students without a special need, vise/versa. There is not enough time to help sometimes…and that is beyond frustrating. What if I am not able to help every child before they walk out of this classroom at the end of the year? (Individual Interview, February 4, 2014)
A. Smith agreed that the number one challenge in an inclusive Montessori classroom is, “not enough time” (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014). Not having enough time is a constant challenge in our classroom and takes away from efficient planning time. However, regardless to the amount of time we are able to have, I have suggested that the foundation of trust built between the relationship of the teacher and the child will support a child in numerous ways.

Collaboration

Teacher-to-teacher.

Benefits. The relationship that needs to have a strong foundation is the one among teachers. This relationship will only succeed by dedicated collaboration. C. Young identified that: “Having my co-teacher and special educator in the classroom turns our classroom into a community; the children need to see a healthy and strong relationship between the teachers—this is done by open communication” (Individual Interview, February 4, 2014). Brotherson et al. (2013) researched collaboration between the educators and found it to be significant component, and Odom (2002) expanded on Brotherson et al. (2013) research further by coming up with seven effective tools to decrease the barriers in inclusive classrooms: Joint participation in program development, shared philosophy and instructional approaches, shared “ownership” of the children, communication between the adults, changing professional roles, stability in relationships, and administrative support (p. 83-85). In my classroom, we make sure that the philosophy we share, is putting our students first. We each have a significant role in the classroom that is identified and respected. Collaboration among teachers, in a co-teacher setting, is a critical component of a successful classroom. Without proper collaboration in my
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classroom, everything would fall apart, and in result, the students would begin to suffer. During the study, if situations were not working effectively in the classroom, then I would need the support of the other teachers. A. Smith reinforced that “teachers need to be on the same page. This is critical. If they are not, then how can we meet the needs of the child? We need to have a common goal—that goal needs to reach the child” (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014). If we do not look at the ultimate goal and work with one another efficiently, the classroom dynamic will collapse.

**Challenges.** One significant challenge I have observed is when teachers come from different training programs to become certified Montessori teacher, such as American Montessori Society or Montessori Education Program International, problems can arise. My co-teacher did the MEPI training and I did the AMS training, which are taught in two different methods. Sometimes we do not see eye-to-eye with the way we should present certain works; this becomes problematic. When asked about how the teachers make this trial work, C. Young replied:

> We are ultimately a team. This is a real relationship. How do relationships work? Open communication and collaboration. In the end we need to step back and see what will best meet the needs of our students. What lesson would be suitable for them in the end? What concept will they absorb? That is what we need to look at. As long as the teachers can agree, the classroom will run smoothly and efficiently. (Individual Interview, February 4, 2014)

This statement demonstrates what proper collaboration in an inclusive Montessori classroom will accomplish.
Figuring out planning time wisely as teachers can be difficult, especially in an inclusive setting. When we have appropriate teamwork, we are able to establish appropriate boundaries. Everyone needs to take a role in the classroom. A. Smith agreed there was a difficulty in finding a balance in the classroom:

I often feel that no matter what someone is getting, another child is being pushed to the side. Many of our students with disabilities require additional time with the teachers. However, when we spend a significant amount of time working with a child with a special need, our typical children are working without a teacher. As soon as we are focusing on a typical child, we find the same problem with our students with disabilities and that they become extra playful and can often be unproductive. That is why it is crucial to have three teachers in our classroom as well as having a balance of 85% typical to about 15% of our students having special needs. It is also important to have a ratio of no more than 20-23 students in an inclusive setting. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

I appreciate that our responsibility of being a teacher is putting the child first. No matter how difficult that task becomes, having the support of the other teachers in my classroom will assist me in discovering what the solution needs to be.

Teacher-to-administration. Another collaborative relationship I have observed is the one among teachers and the administration. Teachers need to be open with administration; this connects the school to the classroom. If there is an issue, I want the administration supporting me and the other teachers in my classroom. If that collaboration is not there, then unnecessary encounters can occur, and do occur. When collaboration is present, the support becomes a smooth and easy process. For example, a
child with a disability in my classroom never comes to school. The parents make up excuses on a daily basis. When the child comes back we must remind her what the class rules are. The lack of consistency becomes destructive not only to her, but to every child in the classroom. During the work cycle, she will knock over her peer’s work and distract them constantly throughout the day. This makes my job difficult. Children need consistency; if it is lacking, then the child will not become normalized (Bobo, 2012). I approached the head of school with this concern, and she told the parents we need a routine of consistency in order to stay at this school next year. Her parents ultimately agreed and promised a change. She now comes every day, and we have observed positive results. This was a significant transformation and provided us with a solution to our chaotic situation. Collaboration between teacher-to-administration is significantly important to our school as a whole.

**Teacher-to-parent.** C. Young identified that in order to establish a sense of peace and productivity in the environment, collaboration with parents needs to be recognized:

> Having collaboration with the parents of your students makes a world of difference. Open communication really helps the child’s best interest—you need to be on the same page with parents, or helping the child will go out the window. They are the connection to the student when away from school. (Individual Interview, February 4, 2014)

In an inclusive setting, communication with parents can be the most difficult. Parent’s lack of knowledge on Montessori education becomes a barrier. Parents would benefit by having parent education nights, to help instruct them on the way the Montessori classroom and set up. I mentioned this to our administration and they agreed. We now
have Parent Education nights discussing different Montessori topics. It has already established a positive outcome with the parents.

This communication is a two-way street. Often I have seen that teachers are not willing to make the effort to get to know the families. Home visits are important in building a connection and meaningful relationship with the families (Greenwell, 2013). Trust needs to constantly be building, especially in an inclusive setting. Frequently, I have experienced parents of children with disabilities, coming to me with numerous concerns. To address this, I give parents progress reports on a weekly basis of their child and at this time present any problems that occurred.

The most significant type of involvement for maintaining a successful learning environment is participation from the teacher and parents (Allen, 2007; Beresford et al., 2012; Bobo, 2012; Odom, 2002). Teachers and parents need to have a unity with one another. A challenge I see daily is a lack of collaboration. This relationship is one of the hardest to build—but needs to be there in order to create a positive environment for the children. In my classroom, we offer the parent’s monthly opportunities to contribute in the class; whether they help us cook, read to the students, go on nature walks, or help the students with a variety of works. This shows parents we want them in the classroom and presents parents an opportunity to observe what we do in our classroom. A student of mine with Autism and a language barrier was struggling academically and socially. His mother approached me with these concerns and I asked her to come observe our classroom. When she did, she saw that her child did not pay attention to the lessons that were given, and when friends tried to work with him, he was rude and ignored them. We met after school to discuss the complications and together we agreed feeling lonely at
home was a factor in his behavior. This child wanted attention whether it was negative or positive. His mother will now regularly help in the classroom. The outcome of this has been astonishing: He now pays attention, is making academic success and has made a group of friends. I believe this was because of parent involvement. A. Smith supported this by stating:

The best way to make sure the children will learn and keep that information with them is to practice it at home. That’s when the collaboration with parents can really be beneficial. Doing what we do at school would help what we are trying to accomplish in the classroom. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

Keeping the collaboration with the parents as an ongoing process will help establish a constructive foundation for the classroom environment.

The Prepared Environment

Montessori created an environment that produced hands-on learning through a prepared environment specially designed to meet the specific needs of children through the variety of materials, the classroom structure, and the overall appeal of the environment which engages natural learning (Bobo, 2012; Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). I have observed that when my students’ walk into the classroom, they are smiling and excited to be there.

Community and peace. Teachers can help build a sense of community in the classroom as well, just by being involved. When I build this type of community in the classroom, everyone benefits. Respect is established in the classroom setting and the children will create respect not only for their teachers, but also their peers and families (Beresford et al., 2012; Brotherson et al., 2013; Odom, 2002; Ogelman et al., 2012). In
my classroom, we do daily Grace and Courtesy lessons that help to build community. We have a Peace Rose in our classroom that assists the children to use kind words instead of showing aggression through their hands. I watched one day how two students—one with a special needs and one that is typical work out an argument about who got to do the Bow Frame (Practical Life material) first. They each took their turn speaking to one another as they held the rose stating: “I feel sad that you took the bow frame from me. I really wanted to do it first,” “I’m sorry Helena. You can do it first.” “Thank you Mila you can do it right after me okay? I will bring it over to you.” “Okay.” “Are we friends?” “Yup!” They worked out the problem; they hugged and then went back to work. I see this type of interaction daily at the peace corner. This peace area benefits children by their discovery of cooperation and respect. The students that are having a hard time controlling their bodies frequently do will then go to the peace area to practice breathing and completing specific works that help to calm the body. Directing children “back to the zone” is a term we use often with our students with disabilities. This will help children focus their minds and their bodies (A. Smith, Individual Interview, January 28, 2014).

**Materials.** Individualized curriculum, compatible for children with or without disabilities, is composed of materials. Each work in the classroom has a purpose (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010). Using real objects, instead of toy replications, helps develop functional skills and the development of independence (Bobo, 2012; Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). Through observation, I have seen that the materials of a Montessori classroom are essential in building a successful early childhood classroom. These works help a child with order, concentration, coordination, and independence (Bobo, 2012; Dorer, 2012). The more the child does these works, the more normalized
they will begin (Dorer, 2012). This helps both my typical learning students and my students with disabilities.

Children are natural learners so Dr. Montessori based the materials on the natural process of interest in learning (Montessori, 1967). In a Montessori classroom, everything is hands-on—which is a concrete method. Manipulation of the materials helps the academic wheels in their mind start processing. This is perfect for an inclusive Montessori setting because Dr. Montessori knew if children could manipulate something with their hands, then they would learn from it (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). I watch as children discover other ways to use the material. A particular typical child loves to work with the Pink Tower. Without showing him, he placed the Brown Stairs next to the Pink Tower and told me: “The cubes are the same size as the side of the Brown stairs.” Both of the works mentioned are a visual sensory material that shows the dimension of size to the child. This child did an extension individually. Everyday I observe the natural discovery of these materials and the academic achievement they bring to children.

The sensory ability to manipulate these works, really help my students with disabilities. They use their senses to guide them through the work; this support learning. One child with Down syndrome loves to work in the sensorial area. Every day she does a work called the Knobbed Cylinders which helps develop her fine motor skills with her pincer grasp, as well as use her visual sense to see which cylinder fits in the holder (discrimination of size). The variety of material on the shelves help her daily and she is learning efficiently this way. The hands-on method of Montessori really benefits every child (Bobo, 2012).
A child needs to use and visualize concrete works before moving to abstract thinking, which comes later in upper elementary (Bobo, 2012; Dorer, 2012). A third year is advanced academically and this is a result of the concrete materials he has worked with. He has been enrolled in a Montessori school since he was two years old. He is now a six year old doing division problems with our Golden Bead materials—we have not moved on to memorization yet. The curriculum in our class goes to a third grade level, so if we have advanced students we are able to fuel their brain, while the students at a three year old capacity are able to take their time with the materials they need. These materials will 98% of the time meet the individual’s academic and developmental needs so they can be successful for the years to come.

**Generalization among students.** In a conventional school setting, a child with a special need is “pulled-out” of their classroom to be isolated in another classroom with a special educator. A. Smith expressed:

> It used to break my heart to pull these children out of their classroom environment. I would have to walk across the classroom to get these children.

> Right then a label was put on them and everyone knew whom I was and where I was taking them. This was hard for the children. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

In an inclusive Montessori classroom, the child is not pulled out of the classroom and that outcome, I have observed, is a huge benefit. Along these lines, A. Smith agreed that an inclusive setting within a Montessori environment:

> Promotes generalization because children with special needs often have a hard time generalizing a skill to a new setting. However, when we provide
interventions in a child’s natural setting, and the interventions/strategies are practiced throughout the day, our students use these skills they have learned in the classroom—not only in a pullout service. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

Everyone is a part of the community and children with disabilities belong with us at all times. A child with Autism needs additional instructions with everything he does. Instead of taking him out of our classroom, we use re-directing which helps our students in a positive manner instead of discipline (Dorer, 2012). We re-direct by showing where we remove a particular material off the shelf, how to do it from start-to-finish and where it is placed back on the shelf. By doing this direct order, I have seen that it promotes this student to follow through.

By having a special education in our classroom, we are meeting their developmental needs, but within the classroom. Beresford et al. (2012) explained why it is essential to have several teachers in an inclusive classroom: “One of the side benefits of an inclusive environment—there are all these extra staff that have incredible expertise that normally you would never get in a regular day care setting” (p. 22). Would this work without three teachers? I am not sure. C. Young worried as she stated: “I honestly do not think so. I think having the three teachers is fundamentally important to the success of the classroom.” This is a challenge however, not every school has the luxury of having three teachers in their classroom.

**Work cycle.** Without the work cycle the learning will not actively take place. The work cycle in an inclusive Montessori classroom is vital to the development of the child (Bobo, 2012; Montessori, 1967). This work cycle should be about three hours long. At my school, we do two of these cycles: one in the morning; one in the afternoon. Children
will enter a period called *false fatigue*. False fatigue is when the noise level in the classroom will rise and the children will seem to lose interest in their work. It will appear that they are too tired to continue working. However, I will never end the work cycle, because I have observed that after this ends, they will return to their work and will absorb more information than before (Bobo, 2012; Dorer, 2012; Montessori, 1967). The work cycle works effectively for both typical learning students and students with special needs. I have observed that it provides children with the opportunity to be engaged on a particular work for a considerable amount of time. This helps to build concentration in children, and children with disabilities need to establish concentration in order to succeed. A. Smith stated during the interview that:

> This amount of time is perfect for these children. They really become engaged with what they are doing and have the ability to work with their peers on peer works. This is not only building that order and concentration, but the social aspect as well. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

However, C. Young noted that challenges arise from transitions for students with disabilities during the work cycle and after the cycle is completed:

> Some children need a more concrete structure. They have a hard time transitioning from one work to another. With free time in that daily schedule, our students will often start playing and disrupting other student’s concentration when they are hard at work and in the zone. This long work cycle a lot of the time because overbearing and tiring. (Individual Interview, February 4, 2014)

I have observed that finding a balance really supports my students. A child with ADD has a hard time moving from one work to the next without distracting others, or often times
causing mischief. I now know when this behavior will occur. One day, when he was about to distract another child, I took him on a walk to another classroom. We visited a classroom with a hedgehog and he was able to observe it for ten minutes. He observed the hedgehog eat, sleep and run around his cage. When we returned to our classroom, he wanted to draw a picture and write about this hedgehog in his journal. He did this for an hour unaware of his surroundings. I was able to turn something negative into positive learning. Teachers need to look at the re-occurring patterns that happen daily in the environment so we can help guide the children appropriately.

**Developmentally appropriate.** Objects in the classroom environment are developmentally appropriate to meets individualized needs (Bobo, 2012; Cossentino, 2010; Mckenzie & Zascavage, 2012). Everything in the early childhood classroom should be developmentally appropriate for the child. Children need to wait until they have had a lesson before they can take a certain work off of the shelf; this becomes very problematic in an inclusive Montessori classroom for students with special needs. I observed students frequently removing works off the shelf that they had not had a lesson on. This eliminates attention towards typical children because the teacher now has to shift that attention on the child with the disability. I have seen this happen with my typical students as well, but it happens more regularly with children with disabilities. It can be a challenge to have such a variety of materials on the shelves—every child wants to experience every work, even when they are not ready to do that particular activity.

**Freedom of choice and movement.** Children in a Montessori environment have the ability to move around as they work (Bobo, 2012). When my students are intrigued by language, science, or a math work, they remove it from the shelf and practice it.
Montessori teachers will use prompts if they are not returning to a certain curriculum area. I have observed that this freedom can benefit children, especially children with special needs. They are not confined to one particular spot. I have a few students with ADD/ADHD, and if they were confined to one spot all day, they would feel that constraint and most likely misbehave. Observing these students, I have seen how difficult it can be to sit for even ten minutes sometimes when I am presenting a whole-group lesson. At that point, I know it is time to end the lesson; I constantly watch my student’s actions. When my students with ADD/ADHD start moving around during work time, you can tell they are breathing for the first time all day. They seem more comfortable when they have this type of freedom and choice. Children at a young age require movement, so we support that developmental need (Bobo, 2012; Dorer, 2012).

However, a challenge I have observed is that a Montessori classroom is not always the least restrictive environment. With so many choices available, some students become over stimulated. They will run around, instead of using their walking feet, and this makes the rover’s job more difficult. Two of my students cannot handle this much freedom of choice or movement. I constantly have to follow them around. One has Down syndrome and another child is a typical student. When a teacher is a rover, their attention needs to be on the entire classroom as a whole; making sure that we are meeting the needs of the students, while the other teachers are giving lessons: two down, one up rule. This can become an issue with certain students—the choice of freedom is outside of their limit and cannot handle it. I have wondered what teachers can do to guide the situation in a more positive light for certain students. We have tried making a “schedule” of particular works they need to do within a work cycle. The typical child benefited from the
schedule; the child with the disability did not. Further research on focusing during freedom of choice would be beneficial.

**Sensitive period.** During the Sensitive Period, a child absorbs concepts easily, whereas when they have passed this learning period, they have to be taught (Montessori, 1967). The different areas in the sensitive period are: language, motor skills, sensory refinement, social behavior, coordination and order (Bobo, 2012). The child will be exposed to the distinctive parts at a young age in the correct stage of the sensitive period.

C. Young stated:

This is why children should start their educational journey at a young age. It is a misconception that education does not become important until kindergarten or even first grade. However, Montessori knew that the child absorbed the majority of information at a young age. (Individual Interview, February 4, 2014)

This is where additional challenges become present. Parents are *not* aware that the majority of learning that takes place when the child is a younger age. Again, that educational night mentioned above would benefit the parents and the children.

**Observation.** Observing in a Montessori classroom is critical in understanding your students. Montessori teachers are *able* to observe their classroom at all times which is a benefit. In conventional schools, finding that time is nearly impossible, but observing in a Montessori classroom is mandatory for the success of the child. If I do not observe daily, how can I expect to meet the needs of my students? By observing, I am able to see firsthand if the child understood the concept of the lesson. Observing the classroom as a whole or of one particular child can both be useful. For this study, I mainly observed the classroom as a whole. I observed what was working effectively and what was not. I was
surprised at what I documented. For example, one child with Down syndrome would knock over other students’ work on a daily basis, but another child in my classroom with Down syndrome, would help her peers instead of being destructive. Why were the two so different? I came to the conclusion that many factors could be the cause: If the child is low/high functioning, consistency at school and mainly that a Montessori setting does not work for every child. Certain disabilities find challenging outcomes in this particular setting, for example children with Autism. A. Smith observed that this was because “children with Autism need a set schedule, a routine of consistency. There are too many choices in this environment and that becomes overwhelming to the child” (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014). When giving a lesson to a particular child with Autism, they are less focused on the lesson and more focused on what is happening in their surroundings. The one-on-one teaching method is then unsuccessful. This makes meeting the need of the child difficult. Without documentation of observations, this would be impossible to know. As a teacher, we are obligated to see if the child is learning significantly or if they are falling behind academically, mentally and socially.

Observations that are effective in a Montessori classroom are running records, which is when you are sitting in a particular area of the classroom and just write (Dorer, 2012). I could not achieve proper observation time if there were only one teacher in my classroom. Perhaps teachers need to recognize how critical this observation time frame is and gain the support they need from faculty, administration, and even parents.

**Summary**

I anticipated discovering a majority of benefits of having inclusion in an early childhood Montessori setting, but I did find challenges daily. A significant outcome was
inclusive education in a Montessori environment does not work for every child. Certain disabilities, such as Autism, might fail to function effectively in this setting. However, this varies by case and spectrum of the child (A. Smith, Individual Interview, January, 28, 2014). When there are too many choices available in the environment it becomes too overwhelming. Sometimes having inclusion in the classroom can become distracting to the other students trying to learn. I believe that it is essential to have two Montessori teachers and one special educator in the classroom, this way, the children with disabilities can receive the attentiveness that they developmentally need to function in the classroom.

A. Smith stated her most significant challenge is finding balance and what her role in the classroom really means:

I feel like no matter what sometimes everywhere…I want to be working with the children with special needs, but I am a regular educational teacher as well, so finding the balance of both needs, the typical student’s needs as well as the special needs and getting that balance where I meet both of their needs is probably the hardest. I think it depends a lot on the children with special needs, on how severe they are. So it is, it can be, um difficult with some…it doesn’t work with everyone. And I want it to, so that can be really hard. (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014)

A question arose during the interview with A. Smith and C. Young—I asked: “Do you think these children will only remain successful if they stay within a Montessori setting for the remainder of their schooling?” A. Smith expressed that she “did not think that was the case, but it depends on the child” (Individual Interview, January 28, 2014).

C. Young believes that staying in Montessori education can:
Make a huge impact on their life. This type of education is not something that you traditionally receive in public school. There is something so beautiful about Montessori education and every child can find success within it one way or another. (Individual Interview, February 4, 2014)

Even though there are difficulties in this type of setting, and it does not work for every child, I believe that the progress we continue to see in all of our students in an inclusive Montessori setting is nothing short of miraculous. This study can assist others in becoming aware of a different type of educational system, as well as see the benefits of inclusion. Hopefully, the challenges can be contemplated and society will have the ability to change this setting to adapt to every child.
Chapter V: Action Plan

Introduction Analysis

Through my research, I found that inclusion linked to Montessori education is significant in adapting a learning approach in the educational system. Children will gain an enriched education that will benefit them for their future endeavors. Peers will gain acceptance, compassion and an appreciation for the importance of lending a helping hand to others. Adults in this environment will follow the child to meet their individual needs so they will be successful. Parents will recognize that there are other types of educational practices that will best suit their children. This will ensure that their child will have the ability to stay inside their classroom so they will become a part of a community in the class instead of being isolated. Children with disabilities will still receive the services they need within the Montessori setting. An inclusive Montessori environment will provide children with a natural setting by using a concrete learning approach that will progress to abstract thinking. The materials are easily manipulated to gain a direct purpose that will benefit the development of the senses as well as preparing them for future curriculum areas. This setting is the least restrictive type of environment with freedom of choice and movement. Students will gain independence from developing concentration as they work on a particular material in a direct order from start to finish with a variety of steps. The level of difficulty will progress when they are ready. This will become evident from the collaboration and the relationship between the child and their teacher.

Nonetheless, inclusion does not work successfully for every child in a Montessori setting. The environment can become overwhelming as a result of too many choices and
children with specific disabilities can fall behind instead of thriving ahead in this setting. Children can become easily distracted instead of building their concentration. This is a result of not having a teacher-centered classroom; the children are the leaders of this environment. The teacher will give children lessons whether it is individual, small group, or large group lesson, but the teacher does not constantly follow them around. Children with certain disabilities need a full-time aide, or attention almost 100% of the time. Without it, they can be distracting or distracted in the environment.

Through the observations I conducted, parent involvement was a critical element of successful learning in an inclusive Montessori setting. It is necessary that parents and teachers to have the same goals for the children in order for the child to be successful in a Montessori classroom. The lack of knowledge and support with parents can result in a negative situation not only for the teachers but for their own children as well. Miscommunication was the most difficult aspect I encountered during this study with parents. Building the foundation of trust and open communication with parents takes a lot of effort and can be the most difficult element of inclusion in a Montessori classroom. But it is critical for the appropriate development of the child. Without collaboration, a classroom cannot function properly and will ultimately affect the students. Montessori education can really benefit the classroom as a whole, but Montessori teachers are faced with challenges along the way.

**Area of Study**

I have analyzed the benefits and challenges for almost a year, and will now reflect on the data collected so I can apply it to my own teaching practice. I recognize that communication and collaboration with my co-teachers is critical in order to achieve
positive modifications. It is essential to be on the similar page in order to discuss what is effective and what is not effective with our classroom dynamic and with our individual students. By meeting with the other teachers in my classroom weekly and by each keeping a recording journal, I know that we will be able to address problems as they occur. This will ensure appropriate collaboration and communication, which is significantly important not only for my own personal classroom, but for effective inclusive Montessori education.

To support parent involvement and awareness of inclusive Montessori education, I will make the effort to develop parent contribution to the classroom regularly. Parents would benefit by observing the classroom on a regular basis so they can observe how we give our step-by-step presentations on the different curriculum areas to their children. Montessori Records X-Press can also assist parents to gain a better understanding of the purpose of each material we use and why it will help expand their children’s level of thinking and learning. Monthly emails will be sent out to parents that will not only inform them of what we will be studying each month, but it will allow parents to connect with what we are learning in the classroom and apply it at home.

Administration is the head of our institution and building that level of trust with one another can make a significant difference. To collaborate frequently with the administration, it would be effective to set up meetings monthly to address any concerns or to gain advice on what we teach. Sending the administration my weekly lesson plans will support what we do in the classroom and will notify them on what we are learning about. Meetings are the way we collaborate efficiently. In order to gain more knowledge
on special education, a special educator should conduct meetings as well on different
disability topics.

**Recommendations**

In order for inclusion to work in an early childhood Montessori classroom, there
needs to be at least three teachers: Two Montessori trained/certified teachers and one
certified special educator. The ratio needs to be 85% typical children to 15% children
with disabilities; this will support the balance of the class. Balance is critical for success
in this particular classroom dynamic. Inclusion in a Montessori setting is becoming a
model-type of school.

Inclusion in an early childhood Montessori setting is difficult to accommodate to
the multiple challenges we face on a daily basis. Taking a step back from my own
personal classroom, I can see the changes I want to construct within this institution as
well as the Montessori *method* as a whole. The American Montessori Society should
update certain curriculum cores, especially the language area. There is a
miscommunication between institutions occasionally, and to make inclusive Montessori
education effective, particular elements should be discussed and solutions need to be
made to create order. The method has not been modified in years, and if Maria
Montessori were still alive, I am sure she would alter certain concepts because her
education should adapt with modern times—not have a stand still principal. It is essential
that Montessori schools research these different topics and to create a commonality
within the curriculum of all institutes. I know I accommodate to my student’s individual
needs on a constant basis. If that means that sometimes teachers need to take a step back
from the Montessori method to do another technique that would better suit the child, then
that is our responsibility to recognize.

**Future Work**

Schools should observe this unique setting to adapt techniques in order to make
their own schools more inclusive and more hands-on. No one loses in this environment;
they only gain. However, educators need to consider that inclusion in a Montessori
classroom does not work effectively with every child. No matter how badly teachers want
it to, it is not possible to meet *all* of the needs of every child out there. Future research
can be significant in determining which particular students cannot function in this type of
setting and why. Removing a variety of choices and control the amount of freedom given
to the child could evidently be a progressive change.

Researchers should use multiple sample sizes for this with multiple disabilities in
the classroom. It would be motivating to do this research over a longer duration of time to
observe different inclusive classrooms. Perhaps the benefits and challenges would have a
different result in distinctive locations. Triangulation could expand the data collection of
this study in the future with additional interviews, surveys, video recordings, photography
and multiple assessments throughout the year. It is a challenge that not every school will
have the luxury of three teachers in their classrooms. Hopefully inclusive Montessori
schools can adapt to having more special educators in the school if only two Montessori
trained teachers can be inside the classroom.

Overall, my research is only a small piece of the larger picture of inclusive
education in a Montessori setting. This study should be researched further so that
challenges can be looked upon and a theoretical approach can be met.
References


Greenwell, C. (2013). English Learners, Family & Community. Lecture conducted from Westminster College, Salt Lake City UT.


Westminster College
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Subjects

Form F
IRB Approval Notification Form

Principal Investigator: Marilee Coles-Ritchie
Co-Investigators: Jessica Ruad

Title: The benefits and challenges of inclusion in an early childhood Montessori classroom.

XX Approved (Exempt)
☐ Approved with conditions

☐ Disapproved

Comments:

1. You are required to immediately report any adverse reactions or complications of the project to the Institutional Review Board.

2. There may be no change or addition to the project, or changes of the investigators involved, without prior approval of the Institutional Review Board.

3. If applicable, the attached consent statement has been approved by the IRB. Please copy this document and use for all subjects entered into this study.

Chairperson, Institutional Review Board

Date 9/24/2013