

English Language Learners and Special Education Students in Montessori Schools: The Case for Push-In Services

Key Points:

- Both education research and federal mandates point toward the desirability of well-implemented inclusion programs for English language learners (ELLs) and special education students.
- Within an inclusion model, bringing interventionists to the general education classroom, rather than separating students for support services, is increasingly viewed as an optimal model for supporting students with special educational needs.
- The logic of the Montessori method uniquely situates its classrooms both to support and benefit from a push-in model of special education and ELL instruction.

Montessori Classrooms Support a Push-in Model

“Push-in” refers to the practice of delivering ELL or special education services inside the regular classroom rather than “pulling out” identified students for services in a separate setting. Montessori programs are ideally suited for supporting this service model.¹ Montessori classrooms offer:

- **Mixed age groups and fully differentiated instruction**—A full array and level of materials is available within each multi-grade classroom. Instruction is differentiated for all students, making the differentiation for those with ELL and SPED needs an easily incorporated and natural part of the classroom.²
- **Individual and small group lessons**—The entire Montessori classroom is set up around one-on-one and small group work. When an interventionist comes in and offers such lessons, it fits well within the norm of the classroom and in no way disrupts or stands out from the usual flow of the classroom.³
- **Uninterrupted three-hour work period**—Montessori classrooms are structured around a three-hour work period during which students move freely between work areas and materials. This structure allows the interventionist to work with students at a mutually agreeable time, minimizing interruptions, supporting student choice and thereby enhancing learning.⁴
- **Materials that move from the concrete to abstract**—Montessori materials begin with concrete representations and then move to abstract for all students. These same materials are easily accessible to ELL and special education students and can be used by push-in teachers to reinforce regular lessons.

Benefits of Push-in for Montessori

At the same time, the impact of the Montessori model is strengthened through a push-in program and, in turn, weakened when students are pulled out of the classroom for services. Push-in services allow ELL and special education students to receive the services they need while reaping the same benefits of the Montessori program as their classmates.

Social integration: Push-in services within the Montessori classrooms benefit the social development of all students in the classroom.

- Exceptional students can be supported to work in small groups with typically developing students and native English speakers.⁵
- All students learn from each other and learn to see differences and individual needs as a normal part of classroom life.⁶

This brief was prepared for NCMPS by Annie Frazer, the founder and Executive Director of Montessori Partnerships for Georgia, a non-profit dedicated to supporting and promoting high quality Montessori schools and family centers for Georgia’s under-served communities.

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- Push-in services in the general classroom support peer engagement and friendships and reduce social stigma.⁷

Respect for workflow: During independent work time, skilled interventionists invite students to lessons as they are ready, rather than interrupting concentrated work or lessons from the classroom teacher.

- Respecting a student’s workflow by minimizing interruptions supports student concentration, self-direction and motivation and is a crucial component of a strong Montessori experience.
- Push-in services allow ELL and special education students to reap these essential benefits of the program.

Reduction of transitions: Montessori pedagogy minimizes stressors such as transitions in order to allow students to focus their full energy on learning. Push-in services create this environment for all students.⁸

- Consistent expectations: In a push-in model, interventionists can observe and follow the classroom teacher’s way of interacting with students.
- Consistent setting: Students learn in an environment with which they are already familiar and comfortable.

Increased independence: As students learn from interventionists how to navigate the environment independently, they increase their success and sense of self-efficacy within the Montessori classroom.

Limitations of the Push-In Model

Under some circumstances, attention to the needs of the child dictates that working with the child in a resource room or other quiet space away from the classroom is preferable to push-in support. Some Montessori communities label this as “step-out” support, as it is flexible and can be initiated by the child as well as by the interventionist.⁹

Circumstances in which step-out support might be preferable include:

- Speech and language services in which pronunciation and articulation are key to student learning
- A highly distracted child who benefits from having a first lesson in a separate environment before working on the material in the classroom
- A child with emotional disturbances who needs a quiet place to regain his or her composure before returning to work in the classroom

Even when a school primarily uses the recommended push-in approach, the availability of a resource room can help meet these specific needs.

Notes

¹ Cossentino, J. (2010). Following all the children: Early intervention and Montessori. *Montessori Life*, 22(4), 38-45.

² Katz, L. G. (1992). Nongraded and mixed-age grouping in early childhood programs. In L. E. Gronland (Ed.), *Striving for excellence: The national education goals* (Vol. 2, pp. 39-42). Retrieved from ERIC: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED363932.pdf#page=43>

³ Tilly, W. D. (2008). The evolution of school psychology to science-based practice. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 17–36). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

⁴ Lillard, A. S. (2007). *Montessori: The science behind the genius*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Scruggs, T. E., Mastropieri, M. A., & McDuffie, K. A. (2007). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms: A metasynthesis of qualitative research. *Exceptional Children*, 73(4), 392-416.

⁶ Ferguson, D. L., Desjarlais, A., & Meyer, G. (2000). *Improving education: The promise of inclusive schooling*. Retrieved from http://www.spannj.org/pti/Improving_Education_Promise_of_Inclusive_Schooling.pdf

⁷ Watnick, B., & Sacks, A. (2006). A snapshot of teacher perceptions on full inclusion in an international urban community: Miami-Dade County, Florida. *Journal-International Association Of Special Education*, 7(1), 67.

⁸ Swartz, S. (2004). *Working together: A collaborative model for the delivery of special services in general classrooms*. San Bernardino, CA: Foundation for Comprehensive Early Literacy Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.stanswartz.com/collaboration.html>

⁹ Leigh-Doyle, P., Maughan, J., & Joyce, M (2008). Whole-school approaches to Montessori special education. *NAMTA Journal* 33(2), 147-17.