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Benefits of Montessori Pedagogy for Special Needs Students

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Senior Capstone

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Benefits of Montessori Pedagogy for Special Needs Students

Abstract

This senior capstone explores the benefits of Montessori pedagogy for special needs students. This research collects the experiences of Montessori and special needs teachers from the San Benito area. Along with the field research, my findings have indicated the benefits of the materials and environment of a Montessori classroom for special needs students. This study shows that the integration of Montessori pedagogy for special needs students proves beneficial in their academic and emotional development and a need to recognize alternative educational styles and their benefits for special needs students. To conclude by bringing light to Montessori pedagogy as a teaching style there are many benefits for a student's development academically and socio-emotionally.

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Introduction and Background

Special education is an important part of society with many students having mild to severe special needs in the classroom there is a need to analyze the methods being currently used to help these students. Montessori pedagogy is an alternative form of education that is often looked over as it is outside of the traditional lens of education. There is a bridge between the two topics from the adaptability of Montessori pedagogy and the need for student-based learning there is also a need to bring to light the benefits of Montessori pedagogy and its relationship with special needs students.

My interest in pursuing research surrounding Montessori pedagogy and special needs came from my knowledge of Montessori pedagogy and how parents are applying it in their homes. From there is where I began to think about Montessori in relation to special education. From my knowledge, I was able to see the surface-level benefits but wanted to know more. My interest also stems from wanting to learn more about Montessori pedagogy in my career as a future educator in special education. From there the knowledge that I had led me to my initial research question of *How Montessori pedagogy can benefit students with special needs?* After the development of the initial research question, I began my research into the background of my topic to start.

During my initial research of the history of Montessori pedagogy was when I learned that Maria Montessori began her professional journey in the medical field. It was during research as a medical assistant that the first ideas of the Montessori pedagogy formed. During this time Maria Montessori was working with children that were living in an asylum; during this time she realized that the living conditions of these children were contributing to their learning

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differences. From here Montessori began to bring awareness to the living conditions of special needs children and she became an advocate that began with better living conditions and then further developed into the need for properly trained teachers for special needs students.

During her work while being an advocate, Montessori began to develop her ideas of sensory-based education while working in Paris. She then continued to further her research as co-director of the Orthopedic School (Association Montessori International 2023) which brought children with all different types of special needs together. It was also during this point that Montessori began to identify as an educator. From here she began to completely immerse herself in education and her development of the Montessori pedagogy.

After her time working in the Orthopedic School Montessori opened her school called Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) in 1907. Shortly after the opening of her school, she published her first book *The Montessori method*, along with the publication of her book *Montessori Pedagogy* began to spread throughout the educational system. In America, the first Montessori school opened in 1911 and began to pick up popularity; although the pedagogy was very popular in America it slowly began to fall into disuse due to language barriers and other limitations due to World War I. Its popularity picked back up again during the 1950s when there was growing dissatisfaction with the traditional American education system and many parents and educators began to look for alternative education methods. During this time Montessori pedagogy became relevant in society and has once again become popular due to discontent within the traditional American education.

Currently, Montessori schools are privately funded and the demographic is for students without special needs. Although Montessori's research began with special needs students she

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Montessori also created her pedagogy to focus on students as individuals. Due to the current climate of Montessori schools the benefits that Montessori pedagogy offers special needs students is not a topic of conversation. This research intends to bring awareness to parents and future educators of special needs students of Montessori pedagogy and its benefits for special needs students. The research is also intended to bring insight into the importance of being aware of alternative education and its benefits for all students.

As a future educator for special needs students, it is important to be aware of different methods that can greatly benefit students. Through this paper, future educators will be able to learn about alternative materials and environment settings to further their knowledge when designing their classroom environment. Along with the development of their classrooms with this knowledge future and current educators can develop their ideas of the relevance of Montessori pedagogy and begin to think about student-based learning in a traditional education setting.

To pursue this research I began to ask myself about the deeper elements of Montessori pedagogy and its evolution over time. I also began to research along with the academic benefits but also the socio-emotional benefits of Montessori pedagogy; and how can we see these benefits. Along with the benefits for the students I took a look into the resources that there are for educators who are wanting to incorporate or expand their knowledge of Montessori pedagogy. This led me to research a more micro perspective of my local San Benito county area and the Montessori school in the area. Locally I was curious if there is a Montessori School in the San Benito area. If there is, how do teachers conduct their teaching?

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My primary research question that I seek to answer is, *How does Montessori pedagogy benefit students with special needs?* And a few secondary research questions are: *What is Montessori pedagogy and how has it evolved overtime? What does the literature say about the benefits of Montessori pedagogy for students? And specifically students with special needs? Are there Montessori schools local to the San Benito area? If there are, how do they conduct their teaching and learning? Does the teaching and learning of Montessori pedagogy benefit students in socio-emotional and academic development? If so, in what ways? Is it possible to incorporate Montessori pedagogy into public school classrooms? Are there resources available for teachers who want to incorporate Montessori pedagogy into their classroom?*

Literature Review

Montessori pedagogy has many benefits, but these benefits are often overlooked. Montessori practices go through phases of popularity for as alternatives for the traditional education, but the benefits for students with special needs is not commonly known, Although Maria Montessori began her work originally with special needs children, the later adaptations of her work became more focused on providing alternative education from the traditional education system.

Montessori pedagogy provides many benefits for students with special needs and non-special needs students. Creating a space of Montessori pedagogy creates a space of guided independence and a creative zone for children to learn at their own pace. Although there are many benefits of Montessori pedagogy, the practice itself isn't well known after primary school age and there's even less information readily available for special needs Montessori programs.

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From the available information, parents and educators are introduced to the general benefits of Montessori pedagogy. For parents of special needs children what they want the most is for their child to be independent, and through research and observations, it is general knowledge that Montessori pedagogy helps foster independence and life skills. In order to review the literature, it has been broken down into the common elements from the literature.

Montessori Environment

In a Montessori classroom, students need to be self-paced as well as have their materials accessible. Bradley (2021) discusses how having “kid-sized” furniture or alternative seating is essential for a Montessori classroom. He continues to explain that having alternative seating is beneficial for students who have mobility issues or students who just simply do not enjoy sitting in the atypical seating.

To create a successful environment for students Dattke (2014) discusses the necessary planning, one main point emphasized is the importance of the social environment of the classroom. In the article, it is stated that inclusion is about creating a working bond between non-special needs students and special needs students. Environmentally Montessori classrooms are of combined ages and benefit highly from older children helping the younger children. In fostering that bond between the students, Dattke (2014) explains that the students will begin to follow the traditional model of assisting students. Dattke (2014) also expresses that to have a successful special needs Montessori program the educators will need to be properly trained in special education to be successful.

Montessori programs often use the natural environment around them as a classroom as well. Nimal Vaz in *Montessori Special Education and Nature's Playground* (2013) elaborates on

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the original idea of Maria Montessori and her ideology of the connection between education and nature. Vaz (2013) explains that in a Montessori environment, the child comes first; they are given autonomy to decide what they want and how they feel. For special needs, students having this autonomy gives them the confidence to express themselves and sets them up to build their independence and confidence.

A Montessori classroom provides students with many unique opportunities. Due to the nature of the instruction of the Montessori environment students are given the opportunity to work together in peer-based instruction. Along with these special needs, students are given the opportunity to observe and practice appropriate behaviors in a natural environment (Ferranti & Long, 2022). Along with the opportunity to observe; students are able to direct their learning, they often choose lessons that are of interest to them and it keeps them engaged with their chosen lesson.

In a Montessori environment, children are given the chance to explore their needs in education. They are given the freedom to “choose, to repeat, and to move” paired with a Montessori-trained teacher along with the environment. (Awes, 2014 p.) Due to children being aware of their needs and skills they often choose repetition once they have achieved a goal when they believe they need it to continue practice (Awes, 2014). Although there are obstacles in the environment that the students are faced with they are also allowed to develop skills on how to navigate them (McDonnell, 2017). To create a successful environment for students with special needs to thrive there are key elements needed in a prepared environment; such as positive experience, controlled social stimulus, and more prepared settings (Mc Donell, 2017).

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A Montessori classroom is often organized to properly support the students based on their developmental characteristics due to the mixed ages in a Montessori classroom. Along with this support, the environment is easily adaptable due to the nature of the organization (AMI, 2023). The adaptability of the Montessori classroom aid in providing special needs students with naturally occurring learning opportunities (Ferranti & Long, 2022).

Montessori Materials

Montessori pedagogy allows special needs students to foster individuality, confidence, and freedom. Bradley (2021) discusses how the sensory aspect of Montessori is very beneficial for special needs students. For example, in the article, there was a comparison that having a moveable alphabet rather than a sedentary alphabet is helpful for students with motor skill difficulties. In the beginning lessons of a Montessori primary school students begin to learn practical life skills, there are sets of materials set up to give the illusion of real-life settings. Some benefits of having more sensorial materials where children can get “explicit experience” from the sounds and symbols that are presented to them in their lessons (Awes, 2014). Along with the experience, the time the students can spend with the materials during activities is significantly longer than in comparison to a traditional education setting. (Awes, 2014).

The activity-based learning responds to the needs of children to learn through movement and knowledge. For students with special needs, this is particularly important because it is presenting them with an opportunity to use materials that have not previously been presented to them (McDonnell, 2017). Students in a Montessori setting are given an education plan that is set

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up for their needs based on their developmental level (American Montessori Society [AMS], 2023).

Due to the nature of the environment, students are able to access furniture as well as different workspaces. Within these workspaces depending on their lesson, students are able to find Montessori materials such as puzzles, individual whiteboards, cylinder blocks, constructive triangles, and grammar symbol cutouts. Along with these materials, there are other materials specifically designed within the pedagogy such as the pink tower, 3-dimensional maps, and counting chains (AMI 2023). An element all of these materials have in common is the sensorial element; for example, the globe has mountains lined with material and what is meant to be a beach or island is often covered in sand.

The nature of the materials provides hands-on experience that is very beneficial for children with disabilities. Along with the hands-on experience, the activities also provide targeted instruction for students as well as have auto-corrective elements which are both proven to support students with disabilities (Ferranti & Long, 2022).

Educators in a Montessori Environment

An educator in the Montessori environment is placed there as an observer and necessary intervention when needed. To be able to have a successful Montessori environment with special needs students educators need to have the proper training in special education Datake (2014). As an educator, it is essential to understand the unique needs of their students when creating activities and lessons. An educator working in a Montessori environment must be able to know the curriculum of the lessons assigned while also having the ability to change and adjust to the needs of the children (McDonell, 2017).

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Observation is a large part of the Montessori educators' role in the classroom, as an educator they should have the ability to objectively observe the children and be able to assist children with their individual needs (McDonnell, 2017). As an educator, you have to be open and available to adapt to the needs of the individual child in comparison to a public school education setting. While observing the Montessori teacher allows students to progress at a self-paced rate, for students with special needs; this is helpful as a component of early intervention.

To maintain the Montessori environment there is often a Montessori trained teacher along with an aide. Montessori teachers typically have the same qualifications as traditional teachers as well as Montessori-specific training (AMI, 2023). A Montessori aide is not required to have specific qualifications but they are usually experienced in child development; aides hold the role of supporting the teacher and helping in creating a peaceful and orderly environment.

While maintaining an orderly environment, Montessori teachers are there to guide their students in their individualized lessons. Along with academic guidance the lead teacher should also support students during their developmental stages. In relation to special needs students, responsive teaching and individualized instruction allow teachers to follow models of early intervention (Ferranti, Long, 2022). Educators working with special needs students should also plan to provide modifications and adaptations for the individual student.

Methods and Procedures

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To start my semester, there was an idea of a topic but it needed to be reevaluated and refined. Meeting with Dr. Thao helped refine the topic and create focused research questions. To find the answers to the research questions I did research through peer-reviewed journals and scholarly articles concerning the research questions and interviews with a director of a Montessori school and lead teacher. There were set criteria when looking for research; the intention was to find the most current research from the past 10 years applicable to my topic. The majority of data obtained for my research has come from a library search through the university library as well as online resources.

Along with the CSUMB online library, Google Scholar helped me accumulate most of the online academic resources for my research. Along with those resources I found very useful information from just looking at the websites of Montessori schools and getting more information from Montessori websites that are available for those who are interested in just getting to know Montessori pedagogy. I found these resources to be helpful because they were very user-friendly and they gave me more perspective of my audience.

During my literature research, I choose to focus on the most recent and updated studies as I want to be able to provide the most relevant information to my audience. Along with finding relevant literature my chosen population to study was special needs children and educators. My focused population of educators was those inside of a Montessori classroom as well as an experienced special needs teacher. I choose to focus my population here because I wanted to keep my research focused on the perspective inside of a classroom. During my literature research, I choose to focus on the most recent and updated studies as I want to be able to provide

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the most relevant information to my audience, myself when comparing my own observations to the literature that I found.

Along with the literature research, I was able to get in contact with a Montessori school local to me and I spent time with the director as well as one of the lead classroom teachers. From my time at the local Montessori school, I was able to see a classroom and get some insight into what the day-to-day activity looked like.

I also had a sit-down interview with the director of the Montessori school who helped me in getting further answers from a Montessori teacher perspective as she does both roles at times. Along with my time with the Montessori school, I also got in touch with a special needs public school teacher and I discussed her beliefs about Montessori pedagogy and how she felt she could incorporate it into a special needs public school classroom.

Before my sit-down time with my participants, I did start with having set out questions that I formed based on my research at that time which can be found in **Appendixes A, B, and C** as the list of initial questions. I tried to frame my questions to be as open-ended as possible to get as much in-person information as possible with the time that I was given.

To effectively use my time with my participants I asked if they didn't mind that I took notes on my iPad. Rather than having my participants fill out a survey I wanted our interactions to flow more as a conversation. This method worked well because it created an environment where I could ask questions for clarification based on their initial responses. I found that I was able to get deeper insight when having a conversation and it gave me the ability to ask follow-up questions rather than having to just interpret their written responses.

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My chosen approaches to gathering information for my research project served me the best to gather my information. Through my chosen methods I was able to acquire qualitative data through online resources and my interactions with my local special needs teacher and the staff and administration at the local Montessori school.

Results and Discussion

As a result of the research from the chosen methods, enough knowledge and information have been presented to draw conclusions as well as start conversations. From the conversations with participants and the research that has been done, it is time to further develop ideas and has expanded knowledge of Montessori pedagogy concerning special education. From here it is expected that the findings from the literature review along with fieldwork are forming discussions surrounding my initial research question of how Montessori pedagogy can benefit special needs, students.

In order to understand the results and findings it is necessary to know the initial questions that started the research. The research began by asking *what is Montessori pedagogy and how has evolved over time*. After gaining an understanding of the pedagogy itself the research became focused on literature and what can be found about the benefits of Montessori pedagogy for students; and then specifically students with special needs. Along with this, the question of whether or not Montessori pedagogy is beneficial for students academically. If so, in what ways? The research then took a micro point of view and looked at if there was a Montessori school in the San Benito County area. Lastly, after all the questions are resources available for teachers who want to incorporate aspects of Montessori pedagogy into their classrooms?

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The discussion begins with understanding *What is Montessori pedagogy and how it has evolved over time?* Montessori pedagogy began with Maria Montessori and her work as a medical assistant; during this time she was working with children living in an asylum and took notice of their living conditions. She began to make connections between their living and learning environment and how there was a possibility it was having an effect on their learning differences. From this she began her own research and began developing the Montessori pedagogy, Montessori continued her work by working with special needs students and began to develop the understanding of the materials, environment, and educator all carry a role in the education of the child. Montessori also began to create ideas of education that are based on the child.

Montessori pedagogy evolved into a well-known way of alternative education that allowed children autonomy in their own education. Along with this Montessori education made its way to the United States and became popular and widely accepted. Although there was a fall in the popularity of Montessori education after the 1920's its popularity picked up again in the 1950s and was greatly accepted as an alternative education method during a time when families were disappointed in the traditional education system. Montessori education still continues to offer families an alternative education path that can suit the individual child.

To continue an analysis of *what the literature says about the benefits of Montessori pedagogy for students? And specifically for students with special needs?* Within the literature, the elements of Montessori pedagogy offer benefits for students with special needs. Due to child centered learning the learning experience of a special needs student is enhanced, students are able to work on their individualized lessons at their pace and return to their lessons when they feel the need to.

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The research explained that students given the opportunity will decide when they feel like they are ready to move on or if they feel the need to revisit past lessons for more practice (Dattake, 2014).

The nature of the early lessons of Montessori pedagogy is intended to start students by practicing life skills. During these lessons, students participate in activities such as washing chairs (as explained by the participant in Appendix A) and kitchen experiences. (Bradley 2021) discussed the importance of special needs students having the opportunity to learn life skills and foster their independence early. Often, parents of special needs, students discuss their desire and hopes for their children beckoning independence and having those life skills for their future.

Student-centered instruction that takes place in a Montessori classroom also leaves the educator in a unique position. Teachers in these classrooms take on the role of an observer who is readily available for intervention when needed. Often in a Montessori classroom the teacher and their aide are not trained in special education, in order to successfully work with special needs students the educators working with them do need to have the proper training. A discussion that was presented a lot during the research is the need for teachers who are working with Montessori students to have the proper training for the education to be effective.

The results of the research continue when discussing *whether the teaching and learning of Montessori pedagogy benefit students academically and socio-emotionally. If so, in what ways? Is it applicable to incorporate Montessori pedagogy into public school classrooms?*

Students in a Montessori environment are able to grow academically and socio-emotionally, due to the nature of the classroom students are able to work with their peers while also learning from

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their actions and methods of learning. This can be beneficial especially for students with special needs because they are able to see the appropriate behaviors and learn with their peers how to apply them in their learning environment as well as their social environment (Ferranti & Long, 2022).

Montessori students also get the unique experience of being able to see and work with their peers who are older than them and are in more mature grades. Students are also given the unique opportunity to have the freedom to return to activities. Awe (2014) explains that through the setup of the classroom environment, students have the ability to repeat lessons that they have moved on from. Paired with the discretion of the teacher this experience gives the students the ability to decide when they feel the need to get more practice in past lessons.

In a Montessori classroom students are also exposed to different engaging activities that allow them to grow academically. When discussing with Participant B the director of my local Montessori school explained the discussion of her student's progress. " We have some students who are working on multiples of seven and some who have already completed those lessons and are coming back to help their peers" (Director of Montessori School, March 23, 2023) (See Appendix B). Through discussion, learning about the progress of some of the students. Is found to be interesting in that the student she was referring to was younger than most who are just being introduced to multiplication and division.

For activities similar to the one that was discussed with the local Montessori school director, the majority of the materials used have a sensory element. The majority of the materials are tangible and can be moved to fit the students' needs. For special needs students this is a common element that is needed, having the ability to feel the materials and move them rather

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than just looking at them gives them the hands-on experience needed to make the proper connections. An example that was introduced to me was how the students learn the alphabet. The cards students use in a Montessori classroom are textured on how the letter is shaped to give students an idea of how the letter is shaped.

From the literature, a conclusion of whether or not elements of Montessori pedagogy is applicable to incorporate into the public school classroom was not definite. But from observations and the research done for this paper, the results have shown that there are elements of Montessori pedagogy that can be applied in a public school classroom. One element that can be incorporated into a public school classroom is the materials used, for special needs classrooms specifically having tangible materials or materials with sensory elements can greatly increase the learning experience. Having the hands-on aspect of an activity opens the students up with a visual and physical connection.

From the micro perspective, the research took a look into if there *are Montessori schools in the San Benito area. If there are, how do the teachers conduct their teaching and learning? Are there resources available for teachers who want to incorporate Montessori Pedagogy into their public school classrooms?* A local Montessori school was located and the director and one of the lead teachers were able to take some time to be interviewed about the school and their day-to-day operations. During this time, different types of training options are available to those who are looking into becoming a Montessori educator. Although neither the director nor the lead teacher had much experience with special needs students they did explain in conversation that if done properly with the proper training they believed Montessori pedagogy could greatly benefit special education students.

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The lead teacher also gave me insight into her day to day; “Often I find the students reminding me of things and keeping me organized.” (Lead Teacher, personal communications March 23, 2023) . She mentioned this in conversation about how they managed to keep the classroom organized and maintained with minimal adult intervention in cleaning up. She and the director explained that the class worked together to keep it together. The older students help the younger students and vice versa (Director of Montessori school & Lead teacher, personal communication March 23,2023).

Problems and Limitations

For the most part, obtaining the information needed for my research was smooth I did find some limitations to it. One of my biggest limitations was time. I had hoped to work with the Montessori school and observe what it was like inside the classroom on a regular day. Unfortunately, I was unable to achieve that but I did get to actually see the classroom and its elements after school. Additionally, although my focus is Montessori pedagogy in relation to special needs students, I couldn’t make contact with anyone who had the experience together. Due to there not being any special needs Montessori programs, I was unable to get information from that lens.

Another limitation I found was the lack of information available on public schools and Montessori pedagogy together. I believe this is because it is often thought that it has to be one method or another and to try and take elements from one for another is often thought over. I felt like if there was more thought put in and research done we would be able to see more results. I also think the lack of resources outside of the Montessori environment can speak to that; during my research, if I wasn’t already going beyond the surface of resources I wouldn’t have been able

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to find the resources that really aided me in my understanding of the materials and curriculum in a Montessori classroom.

Upon completion of this project, I think if there was the limitation of time I could have done my research differently and had another approach. Although time was not on my side I think as a future educator I've been exposed to another beneficial side of education that will greatly benefit me in my future career.

Recommendation

In order to have a cohesive connection between Montessori pedagogy and special needs education it is recommended that more Montessori schools begin to explore incorporating special needs programs into their school. In order to do this it is also recommended that there is special needs training incorporated into Montessori training. This is an essential recommendation, in order to have a successful program the teachers need to have the proper training and experience to work with special needs students.

Also, there should be more conversations surrounding the importance of alternative teaching and learning for special needs education. Having these conversations will create more opportunities for special needs students, parents of special needs children, and educators.

Another recommendation is that public school educators and administrators explore more on incorporating elements of Montessori pedagogy into the public school education system. This recommendation comes from the lack of information available on any attempt at incorporating Montessori pedagogy into a public school setting. If classrooms were to incorporate any

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elements of Montessori pedagogy it is recommended that they begin with the sensory and hands-on materials and activities.

Conclusion

The research began by questioning *How does Montessori pedagogy benefit special needs, students?* Through the research, it can be seen that there are general benefits of Montessori pedagogy for the teaching and learning of special needs students. Along with this, the benefits can be seen during the academic and socio-emotional development of students. From the literature review the environment, materials, and educators within the Montessori pedagogy have proven to be beneficial, through a combination of all 3 elements working together students benefit greatly.

The Montessori environment provides an organized self-directed learning environment, students are able to take charge of their learning and have their educators around for support. A Montessori environment also provides students with easily accessible materials and different types of learning environments. Montessori materials are very beneficial for special needs students, all elements of Montessori activities include some type of sensory or hands-on aspect within the lessons. Educators within the Montessori pedagogy have the proper training to be a montessori lead teacher. Their role within the classroom is to be adaptable and provide assistance when needed, for a Montessori teacher adaptability is very important because, through their observations and the teacher's discretion if a student needs an adapted lesson, they have the ability to provide that for the students.

To conclude there are benefits from Montessori pedagogy for special needs students. If done properly and teachers are given the proper training and education the creation of more

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Montessori special needs programs can be successful and beneficial for special needs students.

Along with creating more programs, having more available resources for parents and educators can lead to the successful incorporation of elements of Montessori pedagogy into a public school classroom.

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Appendix A

Questions for a Montessori Teacher

1. Why did you decide to become a Montessori teacher?
2. What does Montessori pedagogy mean to you?
3. Have you ever worked in a public school classroom? If yes, what was that experience like for you as a teacher?
4. How does your classroom differ from a public school classroom?
5. Have you ever worked with special needs students? If yes, can you describe that experience for me?
6. Have you ever worked with special needs students at the Montessori school?
7. Can a Montessori classroom accommodate students with special needs? If yes, Please explain?
8. How do you think Montessori pedagogy can be beneficial for students with special needs?

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Appendix B

Questions for Montessori Administration

1. What made you want to get involved in Montessori pedagogy?
2. Have there been special needs students in the Montessori school?
3. From the administration perspective do you think Montessori pedagogy can be compatible with special needs students?
4. How have you worked with your teachers to create an inclusive learning environment?

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Appendix C

Questions for a Special Needs Public School Teacher

1. Are you familiar with Montessori pedagogy?
2. Have you ever considered Montessori pedagogy for special needs students?
3. If the option was given would you integrate or simulate a montessori style classroom for your students?
4. Can you envision students benefiting from a Montessori style classroom? If yes, what does that look like?