



# **Integrating the Educational Principles of Maria Montessori in the Process of Pedagogical Support for Pupils with Learning Disabilities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the present article was to search for new ways of individual pedagogical support for primary school children with learning disabilities. The article describes the mechanisms for putting the educational principles of Maria Montessori into the system of pedagogical support for children with learning disabilities, which apply the exercises of practical life to a real social environment. The objective of the exercises was to develop universal learning activities, e.g., the ability to plan and manage a child's activity, to reflect its results, to build up communication, to encourage cognitive development.

**Keywords:** Learning Disabilities, Individual Pedagogical Support, Maria Montessori, Universal Learning Activities

**JEL Classifications:** I20, I23

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Currently, the pedagogical approaches of Maria Montessori are experiencing their rebirth around the world. This can be explained by the fact that many of the conclusions about the methods for children's development and learning, which were developed by Maria Montessori in the early twentieth century, are now reaffirmed by the contemporary neuroscience research. This affects above all the extent of the child's activity in the learning process. Currently, the child is seen by teaching science as an active creator of his/her own knowledge, competencies and his/her personality. The educational principles of Maria Montessori refer to the first phase of reform-oriented pedagogy, to the theory of free education. The Italian physician and educator believed that a child's desire to be independent from adults is a manifestation of his/her growth impulse caused by the nature, and so education should help him/her to become independent.

At the present time, the official system of education and training, which had been accepted in Russia, is being overhauled. Now, the

state sees the purpose of training and education in providing certain conditions for individual self-fulfillment of the child.

Those fundamental changes in the social order of the state resulted in the revision of tasks of correctional work with children who have learning disabilities. Now, this work does not focus on identifying and correcting defects and developmental abnormalities of a child, but on the intensification of natural mechanisms, the creation of conditions conducive to the development of each child in the normal range.

In the context of the new standards adopted in the system of education, the principle of an environmental learning process becomes extremely important in Russia. This principle takes into account the real conditions of life, in which the life of the child takes place. In our opinion, the educational principles of Maria Montessori offer the maximum of opportunities for all the tasks listed above.

Nowadays, the term "executive functioning" is widely used by English-speaking scientists to explain the causes of learning

disabilities that schoolboys/girls having, who do not have any evident deviations in their intellectual or physical development. The essence of this concept lies in the fact that many researchers see the reasons of learning disabilities of children not in the lack of certain knowledge, but in the lack of the ability to organize their own learning activity, namely to get to work without delays, to plan work stages, to select and organize the materials necessary for participating in a particular exercise, to complete his/her own work on time, to bring a case to a successful conclusion, to properly evaluate the results by oneself.

The impaired ability to organize one's activities has come to be known in the scientific literature as "executive functioning disorder" (Cooper-Kahn and Dietzel, 2008; Heward, 2012; Weinfeld and Barnes-Robinson, 2013). Until recently, there was no equivalent for the term "executive functioning" in domestic pedagogical science, but the new Federal State Educational Standard (FSES) introduced the concept of universal learning activities, which is very similar in nature to the concept of executive functioning (Asmolov, 2014).

In the scientific literature the concept of "universal curricular activities" is seen from two viewpoints: First, as the ability to actively and consciously develop the social experience for self-development and self-improvement; secondly, as a set of modes for action of trainees that develops the abilities not only to independently acquire new knowledge, but also to organize this process (Shatalov, 2014).

There are the following types of universal learning activities: Personal, regulatory, cognitive and communicative. The development of universal learning activities can take place both in school during school hours and after school, as they are metasubject in nature. The ways of development of universal learning activities during extracurricular activities, for example, in the course of solving the so-called vital problems, were developed in the program "School 2100."

Working on the solution of vital problems, the child, as a rule, faces a deficit or surplus of information that contributes to the development of cognitive universal learning activities. The ability to set goals, create a plan of action and evaluate the success of the plan relates to the regulatory universal learning activities. This work can harmoniously complement class-lesson activities and allows achieving metasubject personal educational outcomes for the child in comfortable conditions in the absence of time constraints related to the scope of a lesson. According to the authors of the program "School 2100," these activities create the prerequisites necessary for further work on projects

**AQ1** (School, 2100; 2008).

Bringing real-life situations in the individual education process for children with learning disabilities, in our opinion, is very promising especially in light of the fact that many modern children operate much easier in cyberspace than they solve simple everyday household tasks. The knowledge offered at school to many children with learning disabilities seems to be far apart from their real life that in combination with a decline in motivation

resulting from a failure in training activities can generate a rather disturbing situation and be reflected negatively in prospects of socialization of a trainee in the future (Wolf and Matters, 2001; Gerasimchik, 2014; Svistunova et al., 2014; Yakimanskaya, 2014; Shcheblanova, 2014).

When developing special educational approaches for children with learning disabilities, the researchers usually concentrate on various options of work with a training material, or on the use of special didactic games, which can make up for a child's weaknesses in development interfering successful training. The method most developed in our country is cognitive neuropsychological approach (Hotyleva, et al., 2013; Glozman and Soboleva, 2014; Semenovich, 2013). However, M. Montessori's works show that in that case, when a child has problems dealing with abstract concepts, it makes sense to go back, in order to work with concrete objects, which is a preparatory phase for more complex learning activities. One section of the objective environment in Montessori approach to education was described as the exercises of practical life. The work of the child under the exercises of practical life program entails the fulfillment of various "household" affairs: Sweeping, washing hands, washing a table, shoe-polish and so forth. Any of these exercises mean the solution of direct and indirect tasks. Even if direct tasks (to learn to wash a table, to clasp buttons, to sweep away garbage from a table, to wash dishes, etc.) aren't connected directly with educational activity, then indirect tasks solved in the course of a child's activity, are important to the preparation for writing, reading and the development of other learning skills. These exercises are usually used in the work with children from 2 to 6 years (Montessori, 1993, 2011).

In the past few decades, a large number of foreign studies showed the link between the emergence of educational disabilities and difficulties in developing self-mastery skills at preschool age. Poor or inadequate self-mastery skills might indicate cerebellar immaturity or dysfunction, which has been shown to be involved in all kinds of cognitive activity (Ito, 1984; Nicolson and Fawcett 2007). Thus, the difficulties in the process of automation of movement (predicting future difficulties with writing and mastering other school skills) can be already seen in children aged 3-6 years, who cannot learn to tie shoelaces, buttoning, use a knife and fork while eating. Maria Montessori's exercises of practical life may be used as a tool for teaching the prevention of learning disabilities, and they can also be regarded as a legitimate tool of universal curricular learning activities (Efimova, 2015). However, work with schoolboys needs creating another object environment, appropriate to their level of cognitive and social development.

Learning disabilities is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, caused by a complex of endogenous and exogenous factors and leads to declining the quality of life of schoolboys and their families. Organization of educational assistance to this group of children, we believe, requires interdisciplinary integration of physicians, teachers, psychologists and other specialists. A sample of a center, where such integration takes place, is a children's center in Munich, where since 1970, children study together at the Montessori-school with a variety of educational opportunities. The founder of the Center was Theodor Helbrygge - a German

physician and teacher, a winner of Germany's highest teaching award Prize in the name of I. Pestalotsti, paid considerable attention to the social aspect of a child's development, highlighting similar to the "psychosis" and "neurotic" pathological forms of social interaction, which came to be known as "socioz." Among the main symptoms of socioz Th. Helbryugge outlined aggression, provocation and social apathy (Ratner, 2010). Unfortunately, the majority of children with learning disabilities have similar symptoms. Our experience shows that it is crucial to integrate the tasks related with real-world problems in the process of pedagogical support for children with learning disabilities. The organization of pedagogical correction support for this group of children, we believe, requires interdisciplinary integration of physicians, teachers, psychologists and other specialists.

The aim of this study was to find ways to optimize the learning process for acquisition the universal learning activities by primary schoolboys/girls with learning disabilities.

## 2. METHODS

The study involved 30 pupils from 7.5 to 8.5 years of age, 1-2-year students, whose parents turned to the center "Logoprognoz" on the emergence of learning disabilities of their children. All the children were examined by a neurologist and with the help functional neurological diagnosis; examination didn't reveal any evident deviations in functioning of the nervous system, there were no marked motor, sensory impairments or intellectual impairment. 18 children showed persistent violations of mastering the written language (10 children had problems with reading, 8 - problems with reading and writing), 5 children had problems with mastering the mathematical material appropriate for their age. All parents (30) described their children as inattentive, disorganized, needing constant supervision and assistance with homework; parents of 27 noted the following problems in behavior and the formation of social skills of their children: Low motivation, lack of interest in learning; difficulties in the "start" of the work on a task; problems with goal setting. A lot of parents also reported that the child does not keep promises; shows infantile behavior; does not like to take responsibility. Thus, despite the fact that learning disabilities were different, they were united though visible problems with the universal learning activities.

We have developed an individual program of exercises for each child, depending on the actual problems of development, which included sessions with a speech therapist, physical therapy sessions with a music therapist and a psychologist. In addition, the exercises of practical life were suggested to the children from the experimental group to be attended 1 time per week for 3 months. The duration of each such class was 80 min. These sessions were conducted individually outside school hours. Of course, the social situation of schoolboys differs significantly from that of a preschooler, so it was decided to expand the educational space: The universal learning activities for schoolboys carried out not in classrooms, but in a real store, market, pharmacy, post office, in a café, where a child went, accompanied by a teacher. The teacher acted as an assistant to a child (as it usually happens

in the classroom the system Maria Montessori), and was active only in the case when the child really needed help. The child during such employment had not only to plan and perform actions with the objects, but also to build communication with untrained adults (sellers, waiters, postal workers, etc.). Such a form of work with trainees, who have learning disabilities, in our opinion, has tremendous potential for forming all kinds of universal learning activities.

Before each session training, every child had the opportunity to choose the most attractive for himself/herself task of the several suggested options, for example, one of the following: To bake waffles; to make a fruit salad; to send a parcel to a grandmother; to pay bills for the use of electricity, etc. Having chosen a direction, a child developed a plan of actions, considering what should be done, for example, the goal - to bake waffles. At first, it was necessary to determine what resources were needed for that, including informational (where you can find a recipe), material (how much money is needed to buy food, how much food you need to buy for one serving), timing (how long does it take to get to the store, how long to bake waffles), where to go in order to prepare everything; who to call for help; how we can evaluate the progress of the task. These kinds of activities are aimed at developing the universal learning activities since the same stages of information processing are also needed to work with the material. Thus, in these activities, as well as in case of the exercises of practical life, direct and indirect tasks were already established that allowed the principle suggested by Montessori to be respected: While working with concrete objects, a child got the experience and skills necessary for dealing with abstract information. After selecting a job, the child collected necessary information, for example, made a list of products and chose a route to the store; went to the store with his/her teacher to buy some products; chose their own products; paid a cashier by himself/herself, counting money and checking a delivery; returned to the center; made dough according to a recipe; baked wafers in an electric waffle iron; laid the table; invited his/her mother and teacher to take their tea together.

While doing these actions, the child's attention was paid to the various stages and modes of operation with information. A child urged to consider all possible sources of information necessary for him/her, and choose the best option for him. For example, it is possible to get to know a way to the store in several ways: To ask passers-by; to use a map from the Internet; to use a navigator in a mobile phone; to walk down the street and look at signboards. Recipes can also be obtained in several ways: From an instruction to a waffle iron; from a book (to buy it or borrow in a library); from the Internet; to learn a recipe over the phone from someone, who has already made waffles. According to our observations, similar kinds of work are more effective when they are carried out not at home, namely in the framework of specially organized sessions at the center, as an educator can estimate possibilities of a child more precisely and give to a schoolboy/girl more independence, than parents in a similar situation. In the course of similar work, all opportunities for application of the written language were used, for example, drawing up lists; notes; instructions; culinary recipes, etc. After the task was completed, it was suggested to the child

to make a written report about his/her work, which contained the following items:

- The most important thing that I have learnt today...
- I got the best...
- Before, I didn't know that...
- It helped that I had already...
- It was most difficult for me...
- Most of all it was pleasant to me...
- My work consisted of the following stages 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 today...
- It was a discovery for me that...
- Thus, despite the fact that a child performs an action, which at the first sight wasn't connected with an educational activity, there was an active development of the Universal learning activities.

### 3. RESULTS

Upon the completion of the course of lessons, parents from the control and experimental groups filled a list of observations, where they noted the areas of functioning of a child, in which there were changes. The questionnaires for parents are presented in Table 1. If the parents didn't notice changes in the behavior of their child, they did not make any marks in appropriate cells, if changes were observed, the parents pointed out the direction of a change.

**Table 1: List of supervision for parents**

| Socio-emotional sphere   | Corporal-impellent sphere   |
|--|---|
| Increase/decrease of independence  | Improvement/deterioration of posture  |
| Improvement/deterioration of sense of humor                              | Increase/decrease of fatigue  |
| Increase/reduction of uneasiness   | Improvement/deterioration of movements coordination   |
| Increase/decrease of self-estimation                                     | Increase/reduction in level of vigor  |
| Improvement/deterioration of ability to accept behavior rules in a group | Reduction/increase of reflectivity when writing   |
| Increase/decrease in the sense of responsibility                         | Less often confuses left-right "on oneself"   |
| Speech (oral and written)  | Less often confuses left-right "from oneself"   |
| Increase/decrease in speech activity                                     | Improvement/deterioration of handwriting  |
| Faster reacts to questions   | Attention - organisation  |
| Increase/lexicon decrease  | Increase/decrease of ability to carry out habitual sequences of actions in a class or at homework performance |
| Improvement/deterioration of phonemic hearing                            | Increase/reduction of time of homework performance  |
| Improvement/deterioration of a grammatical system of speech              | Improvement/deterioration of visual attention   |
| Improvement/deterioration of ability to recognition of letters           | Improvement/deterioration of acoustical attention   |
| Increase/decrease of a desire to independently read                      | Improvement/deterioration of ability to control impulsiveness   |
| Improvement/deterioration of reading aloud                               | Initiative increase/decrease in educational activity  |
| improvement/deterioration of reading to oneself                          | Increase/decrease in ability to performance of step-by-step instructions                                      |
| Improvement/deterioration of sounds pronunciation                        | Increase/decrease ability to understand a task conditions   |
| Improvement/deterioration of ability to retelling                        | Increase/decrease ability to prepare the materials necessary for performance of a task                        |
| Improvement/deterioration of reading skills                              | Increase/decrease of ability to organize the materials necessary for performance of the task                  |
|  | Increase/decrease ability to independently put the purposes in those kinds of activity where it is necessary  |
|  | Comments  |

Since the exercises of practical life did not look like regular classes with the use of educational material, they have caused great interest with the majority of children in the experimental group. The parents noted that children were actively involved in the domestic affairs on their own initiative, obviously enjoying the cleaning or washing dishes. Even the negative attitude of some of the children to the fact that they had to write something in this model in the classroom could be used with advantage. A striking example - the situation with Boris D. (8 years), who had the expressed disabilities of graphomotor skills; he refused to write and was negatively disposed towards any proposals of teachers. After the boy said that he hated all school teachers, he was asked to write what he thought of them. This task not only caused great enthusiasm from the boy and forced him to write, but also had a psychotherapeutic effect - the level of emotional intensity decreased then obviously.

The analysis of the conducted research results is presented in Table 2. It becomes obvious that the changes, which have occurred in the experimental group of children, relate more to the universal learning activities, while academic skills have improved significantly in both groups.

### 4. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The educational principles of Maria Montessori, in our view, fully meet the requirements of the new standards of education adopted in our country. However, the presence of the class-lesson system limits the possibilities for the application of the educational principles of Maria Montessori in a regular school. It seems to us that the process of pedagogical support for children with learning disabilities can be managed in a more flexible manner on the basis of special centers.

**Table 2: The analysis of the results of efficiency of the exercises of practical life inclusion in the program of pedagogical support for the school boys/girls with educational disabilities**

| Qualitative changes   | Experimental group | Control group |
|---|--------------------|---------------|
| Improvement of sense of humor   |                    |               |
| Development of the ability to perceive the “body language”                                |                    |               |
| Decrease in level of uneasiness   |                    |               |
| Increase in communicative activity  |                    |               |
| Reduction of time of reaction by references and questions                                 |                    |               |
| Lexicon increase  |                    |               |
| Improvement of phonemic hearing   |                    |               |
| Improvement of ability to letter recognition  |                    |               |
| Improvement of reading aloud quality  |                    |               |
| Improvement of reading to oneself quality   |                    |               |
| Sounds pronunciation quality improvement  |                    |               |
| Improvement of ability to retelling   |                    |               |
| Improvement of reading understanding ability  |                    |               |
| Posture improvement   |                    |               |
| Fatigue decrease  |                    |               |
| Improvement of coordination of movements  |                    |               |
| Normalization of level of vigor   |                    |               |
| Ability improvements to be guided in space “on oneself”                                   |                    |               |
| Ability improvements to be guided in space “from oneself”                                 |                    |               |
| Handwriting improvement   |                    |               |
| Reduction of reflectivity when writing  |                    |               |
| Visual memory improvement   |                    |               |
| Improvement of acoustical memory  |                    |               |
| Improvement of visual attention   |                    |               |
| <b>The items concerning the development of universal learning activities</b>              |                    |               |
| Independence increase   |                    |               |
| Increase of responsibility for the acts   |                    |               |
| The development of the ability to accept rules  |                    |               |
| Development of ability to use of conventional communicative means in dialogue with adults |                    |               |
| Self-estimation increase  |                    |               |
| Improvement of ability to performance of habitual sequences of actions                    |                    |               |
| Reduction of time spent on performance of homework  |                    |               |
| Initiative increase   |                    |               |
| The development of the ability to understand task conditions                              |                    |               |
| Improvement of ability to performance of multistage instructions                          |                    |               |
| The development of the ability to select and organize materials for work                  |                    |               |
| Improvement of the ability to goal-setting  |                    |               |
| Improvement of the ability to impulsiveness control                                       |                    |               |

During the research, we faced the fact that even such a simple life situation as a trip alone to the store, as a rule, is completely new and unusual for an 8-year-old child living in St. Petersburg and having educational difficulties. Almost all children of 7-8 years, with whom we held classes, could not be guided by time, did not know how to count money and did not own the other basic skills, providing the required level of autonomy and independence from adults. Such children often spend a whole day on homework, and in the remaining time they play computer games, and so all areas of their life suffer, as a result there is a failure in the formation of all kinds of the universal learning activities: Personal, communicative, regulatory and informative. Attending extracurricular activities does not solve the problems with the formation of the universal learning activities, as in this case, everything is decided not a child, but an instructor, who conducts exercises. The instructor sets goals, identifies ways to achieve them, and controls the results. That is, the activity of a child is reduced to a minimum in the process of acquiring new competencies.

Carrying out the exercises of practical life, the child is able to take responsibility for the outcome. The experience of a successful activity, acquired in the course of such “domestic” affairs can

be further extended to the work with an educational material: “Do you remember how yesterday you counted on yourself how many products it was necessary to buy for the cake - in this task in mathematics there is the same thing. You already know how to do it yourself.”

Not a criticism, but positive encouragement promotes a greater degree of motivation to learn. Another important principle of Montessori education, which is being implemented during the execution of these exercises, is self-control of mistakes the child admits. In this case it is quite accessible as the child sees the results of his/her activities at every stage and can correct them, without waiting for assessment by adults. The ability to monitor and adjust his/her performance is a prerequisite for raising the capacity for accurate, independent, purposeful activity of the child that is the highest degree of his/her independence from adults. The work of the child in the environment developed by the educational principles of Maria Montessori normalizes the child’s social behavior, increases independence and responsibility, which ultimately provides the ability to learn, and thus develops the child’s universal learning activities.

Unfortunately, most adults (teachers and parents) cannot adequately estimate the possibilities of the practical life exercises that in addition to the development of universal curricular activities solve another important task - make up for a lack of motion, which is a distinctive feature of the modern life. This position, in some cases, leads to very sad consequences. As an example, we present the story of Dima D., whose parents were forced to turn to our center on the educational difficulties, when Dime was 9-year-old. By the time the boy had already learned individually for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year, as he didn't cope with the program of the Russian language in the first and second grades. The grandmother described her grandson as follows: He was not interested in anything, was lazy, gradually degenerated. Then it became clear that Dima had previously attended classes in the pool, but because of the fact he spent every 5-6 h doing his homework, the classes had to be cancelled. By 9 years of age, the reading and writing skills of Dima were poorly formed, he avoided those activities, which, in fact, were very difficult for him, as the boy had dyslexia and dysgraphia. The level of intelligence of the boy was in the normal range (lower limit). During the conversation with Dima for the first few minutes, we really thought that he was not interested in anything. But then it became clear that Dima was fond of cooking and breeding of indoor plants. When he talked about it, his eyes literally shone with happiness. None of the adults around him did not consider those hobbies to be serious enough. Meanwhile, at the age of 9 Dima was forced to perform all the same tasks in reading and writing for the first class, which corresponded to the level of his writing skills, but were of no interest to the cognitive point of view. As a result, a teacher, who is engaged individually with the boy asked his grandmother to bring the written recommendations from our center for training of Dima, since, in his viewpoint, the traditional educational methods were ineffective. We have developed a personal training plan, which allowed us to relate the task of reading and writing with the exercises of practical life. First, it was suggested to Dima to make the directory with the names of all the plants that there are in his house, describing the features of care. The second task requires the use of the written language - to describe ten ways to cook omelets (since Dima said it was his favorite food). In addition practical recommendations were given to teachers on the selection of texts of varying difficulty for individual lessons with Dima. In addition, practical recommendations on the selection of texts of different difficulty levels for individual lessons with Dima were developed for teachers.

The positive effects of the exercises of practical life are evident not only in dealing with "normal" children with learning disabilities, but also with the "special" teenagers studying in correctional school in grades from 7 to 8 having alalia diagnoses, mental retardation, intellectual disability and the development of autism spectrum disorders. An important result of these studies is to change the attitude of parents to the child and the level of responsibility for their actions, to which the child is ready at the moment. Parents should encourage the child to perform these tasks at home, teach him/her to self-sufficiency, independence and the ability to care for themselves and others, as well as the ability to plan their activities and assess the quality of the results. We encourage parents to provoke the emergence of situations, in

which the child faces the natural consequences of their actions, to avoid the constant "safety net" of the child.

In the future, our center will conduct group sessions for young people with different educational opportunities involving collective work on socially useful projects. This form of work will be an organic continuation of the individual sessions on exercises of practical life. This form of work will be an organic continuation of the individual sessions on the exercises of practical life.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Our study demonstrates the possibility of applying the educational principles of Maria Montessori in the process of pedagogical support for children with learning disabilities. It is important to note that a special role in the educational process belongs to the teacher, who is also an assistant coach of the child and what is more - an observer. To build relationships with children with learning disabilities, teachers should have certain qualities: Professionalism, optimism, faith in the child's potential, love for children and his/her work. If you have those qualities, the task of forming the children's universal learning activities, namely the ability to learn, can be solved in the course of any joint activity of a child and adult.

In line with the humanistic paradigm of modern pedagogy, it is very important to use the unique capabilities of interactive Montessori pedagogy, which has been applied for more than a century around the world. Child's freedoms to develop, spontaneity, progressive education, which are particular to a given educational system, allow implementing in practice the tasks associated with the personalization and humanization of schooling. It is the Montessori pedagogy as a pedagogical system of integration that allows creating optimal conditions for learning and development of every child, regardless of his/her initial abilities.

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