

A Map of Approaches Supporting Children with Diverse Learning Needs

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Why No Single Method Is Enough

Supporting children with diverse and additional learning needs is one of the most complex and rewarding areas of education. Over the years, educators, therapists, psychologists and medical professionals have developed many different methods to help children who experience challenges with learning, movement, communication, attention or emotional regulation.

It is important to recognise that no single therapy or educational method “cures” a child or resolves all developmental challenges. Children develop in complex and highly individual ways. What helps one child may not help another in exactly the same way.

In practice, progress often happens gradually as different supports work together over time. Educational approaches, therapeutic interventions, developmental movement work and structured learning programs can each contribute small but meaningful gains. When combined thoughtfully, these supports can help a child move closer to their true potential, independence and functional wellbeing.

For many children, improvement occurs through the combination of multiple approaches, each addressing a different aspect of development such as: Language and literacy, movement and coordination, sensory processing, emotional regulation, cognition and learning, independence and functional life skills, attachment and the capacity to form healthy relationships, social belonging and participation in community, spiritual development and inner wellbeing, a growing sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Over time, these approaches can chip away at barriers to learning and participation, helping children access education, relationships and daily life more successfully. What emerges from this work is an ecosystem of methodologies. Each field focuses on a different part of development, and together they form a broader picture of how children grow and learn.

Below is a map of several major domains that contribute to supporting children with diverse learning needs.

1. Educational Philosophy and Child Development Approaches

Educational philosophies such as Montessori, Steiner (Waldorf), Reggio Emilia and democratic education models such as Sudbury and Summerhill schools, share a deep respect for the natural developmental pathway of the child. Rather than forcing children into rigid academic

expectations, these approaches aim to support learning in ways that align with the child's developmental stage, interests and readiness.

These philosophies emphasise: Independence, curiosity and exploration, hands-on learning, mixed-age social environments, developmental readiness, respect for the child's natural developmental pathway and social awareness.

For example, Montessori education uses carefully designed materials to help children develop independence, concentration and sensory understanding. Maria Montessori believed in 'Education for Peace', recognising that the child is the creator of the adult and therefore the creator of society. By supporting the child's development fully, education helps prepare individuals who can contribute to a more peaceful world and are aware of their own worth. In Montessori's vision, the aim of education is not simply academic achievement but helping the child find a meaningful place within society, developing the independence, responsibility and social awareness needed to interact constructively with the world for the good of all.

Within the Montessori tradition there is also a specialised field known as Montessori Therapy. This was developed from Maria Montessori's work with children experiencing developmental differences and her adaption of many of Seguin's methods and apparatus. This therapy is based on medical pedagogy and emphasises the individual's own pathway. The sessions prioritise the individual's sense of worth and personal dignity.

Similarly, Steiner/Waldorf education emphasises imagination, rhythm, movement and artistic expression, recognising that children pass through distinct developmental stages that shape how they learn. Within Steiner education there are also specialised approaches such as The Extra Lesson, which supports children experiencing learning challenges through movement, rhythm and developmental exercises.

Reggio Emilia is a child-centred educational philosophy that views children as capable, curious and rich in potential. It emphasises relationships, collaboration, creative expression and the environment as the "third teacher." Through inquiry, documentation and shared exploration, Reggio Emilia supports children's identity, voice and participation within a learning community. In the context of diverse needs, it is especially valuable for its strengths-based image of the child and its emphasis on belonging, communication and shared meaning-making.

Another important philosophy connected with child-centred education is democratic education. The Sudbury model of education is based on the principle that children learn best when they have the freedom to follow their own interests. Sudbury schools operate through democratic governance where students and staff share responsibility for the functioning of the school. Students choose how they spend their time, pursue their interests independently and participate in school meetings where decisions are made collectively.

A.S. Neill and Summerhill School (where my father-in-law was the first pupil) is an historically influential approach based on the work and beliefs of A.S. Neill, founder of Summerhill School in England in 1921. This is the first democratic school of the modern era. Neill believed that emotional wellbeing and freedom were central to

healthy development. At Summerhill lessons are optional,, children are trusted to direct their own learning, school rules are created through democratic meetings involving both students and staff. Neill argued that when children feel safe, respected and emotionally secure, they naturally become curious and motivated to learn.

2. Structured Literacy and Language-Based Learning Approaches

Some children experience specific difficulties with reading, spelling or language processing. Structured literacy approaches have been developed to provide explicit, systematic instruction in the structure of language. Structured literacy has become an important part of modern educational support for students who struggle with reading and spelling.

These approaches are commonly used to support children with dyslexia and language-based learning differences. Examples include: Spalding Method, Orton-Gillingham, Lindamood-Bell programs. These approaches typically use multisensory teaching methods that combine visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning to help children understand how written language works.

3. Movement-Based Learning and Neurodevelopment

Another important field recognises that learning is closely connected to the development of the body and nervous system.

Movement-based learning approaches focus on how motor development, reflex integration and sensory processing influence attention, coordination and readiness for academic learning. These methods are often used to support children experiencing:, attention challenges, coordination difficulties, sensory processing differences, developmental delays affecting learning. Examples of movement-based approaches include:, Brain Gym / Educational Kinesiology, Rhythmic Movement Training (RMT), INPP neurodevelopmental programs, HANDLE, Bal-A-Vis-X, Move to Learn. These approaches use carefully designed movement activities to strengthen the connection between the brain and body, which can improve focus, coordination and learning readiness.

4. Therapeutic and Creative Approaches

Creative and therapeutic approaches provide children with ways to express emotions, process experiences and develop communication skills. These approaches are particularly helpful for children who have experienced trauma, emotional stress or communication challenges. Examples include:, Play therapy, Art therapy, Music therapy. Through creative activities, children can express feelings that may be difficult to communicate through words alone. These approaches can help build emotional resilience, self-expression and social connection.

5. Regulation, Mindfulness and Body-Based Approaches

Many children benefit from approaches that help regulate the nervous system and support emotional balance. These approaches focus on:, breathing, body awareness, emotional

regulation, calming the nervous system. Examples include: Yoga for the Special Child (Sonia Sumar Method), Kundalini-based yoga practices, Mindfulness training, Meditation practices. Mindfulness programs help children develop awareness of their thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Through simple breathing and awareness practices, children can learn strategies for calming themselves, focusing attention and managing strong emotions.

An additional approach that often accompanies mindfulness-based work is Nonviolent Communication (NVC), developed by Marshall Rosenberg. NVC helps children and adults develop skills for: recognising emotions and needs, communicating feelings respectfully, resolving conflict peacefully, building empathy and understanding in relationships. Together, mindfulness and compassionate communication practices can help create calmer and more emotionally supportive learning environments.

6. Neurodiversity and Inclusive Education Frameworks

In recent years there has been increasing recognition that neurological differences are a natural part of human diversity. The neurodiversity movement emphasises creating educational environments where different learning styles are recognised and supported rather than viewed solely as deficits. This is certainly a more positive perspective where the child is seen as a person rather than their diagnosis. Inclusive education frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) encourage schools to design learning environments that accommodate a wide range of learners from the beginning. These approaches focus on: strengths-based learning, flexible teaching methods, inclusive classroom environments, respect for individual differences.

How These Domains Connect

Although these approaches come from different traditions, they share several common goals: supporting developmental readiness, strengthening learning foundations, improving emotional regulation, promoting inclusion and participation, developing self worth.

In practice, many educators and therapists combine several approaches. For example, a child might experience a learning environment that includes: Montessori classroom practices, structured literacy instruction, movement-based regulation strategies, sensory supports recommended by occupational therapists, mindfulness practices that support emotional regulation. Together, these approaches form a multidisciplinary network of support.

Toward Independence, Belonging and Human Flourishing

Across these different traditions and methodologies we see a shared vision of what education and developmental support can offer children. Beyond academic learning, the deeper goal is to support the growth of the whole human being — helping each child develop independence, meaningful relationships, a sense of belonging and an emerging purpose in life.

These educational traditions express similar underlying principles about human development and education. For example: Montessori's vision of Education for Peace, recognising the child as the creator of the adult and therefore of a peaceful society. Steiner's concept of educating the head,

heart and hands, nurturing intellectual, emotional and practical capacities together. A. S. Neill's emphasis on emotional freedom and wellbeing as the foundation for healthy development. Reggio Emilia's view of the child as a capable citizen, able to contribute ideas, creativity and responsibility within the community.

Together these perspectives highlight the importance of respecting the child's developmental pathway, autonomy and emerging sense of identity and purpose. These educational philosophies remind us that learning is not only about academic content — it is deeply connected to child development, environment and relationships.

When education honors these dimensions of development — independence, attachment, belonging, responsibility and meaning — children are supported not only to overcome challenges but also to grow into confident, compassionate and capable members of their communities.

Ultimately, supporting children with diverse learning needs is not about finding a single solution. It is about building a community of knowledge, compassion and collaboration, where multiple approaches work together to help every child move closer to their potential.

The Role of Collaboration

Initiatives such as the Montessori Medical Partnership for Inclusion (MMPI) aim to bring together educators, therapists and medical professionals who share a commitment to supporting children with diverse needs. Through conferences, online courses, workshops and collaboration, such partnerships encourage a broader understanding of childhood development and inclusive education. To that end I have added a list to the Australian page of MMPI showing Australian, Asian and Worldwide conferences and special interest groups that you may be interested in joining.

In my next blog I would like to look at the role of allied health within the classroom and as a therapy accessed by parents in a clinic and how we can follow this up within the Montessori learning environment. Ultimately, supporting children with diverse learning needs is about creating environments in which every child can flourish intellectually, socially, emotionally and as a contributing citizen of their time and place.