

How to include rewards and punishments into your classroom.

In this paper we will summarise Dr Montessori's and other child development theorists' approaches to: rewards and punishments, fantasy and imagination, and nature in education.

Maria Montessori had a very different and revolutionary view of the way we interact with our students, in reference to punishments and rewards. She developed her pedagogy around the premise that we as adults should seldom have to punish the students in our classroom and this was down to the preparation of the environment. She agreed that disrespectful or violent behaviour should be checked immediately, but insisted that if the teacher could pre-empt the issues that could cause the misbehaviour, then punishments would not need to be enforced.

To Maria Montessori, the prepared environment was as important, if not more important than the teachers themselves. She believed in a preventative methodology that would allow the teacher to distinguish the misbehaviour before it had a chance to ignite. There were several methods of prevention, but some were; informing the children of what would happen next, giving them several choices, and allowing the children to choose their own activities. She understood that if children were asked to sit all day and listen to a teacher talking, they would build pent up energy that would eventually overflow, leading to misbehaviour. As Montessori children are permitted to move at will, have a chat or even go for an intelligent walk around the room, this energy is dispersed evenly and gradually, leading to less misbehaviour.

Two defining factors that make the Montessori method unique in terms of punishment are that children can be taught individually without the teacher having to worry about the functionality of the rest of the class, and that mistakes are natural and should be embraced as moments children can learn from.

The Montessori classroom can function perfectly without the teacher being present. So the fact that the teacher is sitting with one child, making learning individualised and differentiated, in itself allows the child to get back on track, whilst allowing the teacher to quietly inform the misbehaving child about inappropriate behaviour or employ strategies to encourage engagement with the environment and materials. This is the polar opposite to mainstream's method of public humiliation or detention for misbehaviour.

The second defining factor is that Montessori considers mistakes as natural and to be embraced as moments students can learn from. If the teacher prepares the environment appropriately, then the students should be allowed to make mistakes. If they speak out of turn, then one would hope an older peer would step in and take lead. If materials are misused and broken, one would expect the child to take responsibility and think of a strategy to fix the problem, and if paints are spilled on the carpet, then the students would know how to clean it up using the sponges and products provided by the teacher. Lillard says, "Design the child's environment in such a way that he learns on his own how to act properly ... they have a built-in desire to correct their own mistakes." (2009: 125)

Rewards, on the other hand, are treated very differently. The reward for doing anything in the classroom is the fact that you as a child have grown, you have deepened your

understanding and have broadened your horizons, making learning tactile and real. The fact that children don't seek the approval of the teacher when completing a piece of work or helping somebody, means that they are doing it for themselves, for one another or for the greatness of humanity. They understand their responsibility and, particularly in cycle 3, they have the capacity to think abstractly, allowing them to understand the world from somebody else's perspective. The rewards are not just a tick or a gold star, they are innumerable, and this opens the flood gates to a world of innovative, life-changing work. "Using rewards as an 'end' can sever the vital connection between the child's will to act and his own internal rewards." Lillard (2008: 106)

So as the children move through the planes of development, leave their egocentric view of the world behind and move towards abstract thoughts, we see that they also move through what Montessori called '*The Three Levels of Obedience*'. This is where a child moves from impulsive behaviour to understanding the repercussions of their actions. These levels allow teachers to manipulate the environment to allow this development to take place and to observe.

As new research emerged in the 20th century many theorists had their views on best practice in education. Einstein argued *that "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution."* (1929) Montessori seconded that opinion acknowledging that Imagination and fantasy play a pivotal role in the education of the child as they move through their primary years, but Montessori stressed the importance of timing during this critical period.

After observing hundreds of children over many years, Montessori concluded that children needed purposeful reasons to work. They needed concrete proof that what they were learning or engaging with had meaning and truth. They needed to feel grounded. She argued that in the early years, or the first plane of development, children found it very hard, if not impossible, to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Imagination and fantasy would have its place, but this would come later and +would manifest itself in a different form to traditional uses of imagination and fantasy.

Once again, it was all centred around the fact that children find it hard to abstract during the first plane of development. They see the world in a very black and white manner. Imagine two cycle 1 children are playing a game of cops and robbers and a cop hurts a robber in the process of the arrest. It is very hard for a child to understand that the robber is actually their friend and not actually a robber but a student of the same age, and that the pain they inflicted during the arrest would be real. Or that monsters don't live under their beds and that not all carpets can fly like Aladdin's. Montessori believed that these misconceptions had detrimental effects on the child's understanding of the world. She understood that as the child moved into the second plane, fantasy and imagination would come naturally as the children start to understand the world from a new perspective.

Imagination has been and always will be a huge feature of education, especially when discussing the methodology surrounding the teaching of writing. The world over, teachers and parents tell fairy tales, stories, myths and legends. Montessori saw this as a possibility

to expand the child's mind of fantasy, but within parameters. She expressed that, "If a child can imagine a fairy and fairyland, it will not be difficult for him to imagine America. Instead of referring to it vaguely in conversation, he can help to clarify his own ideas of it by looking at it on a globe." (1988: 161) The child's amazing ability to imagine and hypothesise allows us to take children to faraway places, impossible scenarios and into the world of scientific exploration, but only when the child is ready.

Montessori and other well-known theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau placed a huge emphasis on the natural world in education. Often we see nature entwined within Montessori's philosophy. Parts of a flower, the timeline of life, the seed, the root, etc. Nature is awe-inspiring and can captivate the most sceptical of audiences. With her focus on sensorial education, nature seemed the logical route to focus on. As Maria Montessori once said, "The land is where our roots are. The children must be taught to feel and live in harmony with the earth." (Gilder, 2009, p.35) Nature is all around you, it's free and it ignites the senses automatically.

Many teachers focus on the prepared classroom environment, but Montessori couldn't stress enough that the outdoor environment has just as much of a role to play. Children should be able to feel, smell, taste and hear the natural world around them. During the absorbent mind stage of a child's development, this is ever more important. Children start to learn the names of objects in their environment. They understand how they look and what they feel like. Their senses are ignited in nature and this inspires a sense of automated learning.

As children progress through their primary years, they start to understand nature as a whole. How nature is linked to the history of the world and how it will determine the future. They can abstract the understanding of their impact on nature and the natural world. The foundations that are laid in the early years surrounding the natural world lead to big picture thinking in the second and third plane. And as the child feels a sense of empowerment through responsibility and freedom, they inevitably take a proactive role in the protection of the natural world. As Montessori said, "There is no description, no image in any book that is capable of replacing the sight of real trees, and all the life to be found around them, in a real forest. Something emanates from those trees which speaks to the soul, something no book, no museum is capable of giving." (1976: 167)

As we move through the 21st century and into a technological era of education, it is crucial to look at Montessori's understanding of how nature can be used in our classrooms. Yes, there are apps and videos we can allow our children to use and watch to simulate the experience of being in nature, but we as teachers must prepare and plan for exposure to the outside world. If we observe leaves spiralling in the wind outside the classroom, this can inspire poetic writing and thought. We can listen to the sound of nature and construct musical notes surrounding these sounds. A walk on the grass after a rainstorm or the smell of a freshly cut leaf all have impacts on the ways children understand the world around them, and if we as teachers facilitate this exposure to nature we will see results from our children that will not only allow them to flourish but will ultimately allow nature to flourish too.

References

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