

Intrinsic Reward

by Usha, Richard and Mike Zelmer

As we prepare for the new school year, we reflect on the past year to find ways to improve ourselves and our teaching skills. What were the problems we encountered last year? How can we solve them? What changes can we make within ourselves? What new materials should we get? Will it help to reorganize the classroom? When we are away, we still spend a lot of time thinking about school!

As I get ready for my new students, one concern that stands out in my mind is the place of reward in my classroom. How do we maintain an environment of learning directed by the inner guides? This is essential to the Montessori way of teaching! It is even more important than the wonderful Montessori materials or the sequencing of the lessons. It is, in fact, the critical difference between Montessori teaching and traditional education.

When directed by the inner guides, learning has its own intrinsic reward. There is the great joy and satisfaction of "Ah, Ha!", as the child discovers things for himself. When a child learns in this way, learning is vital and lasting. Maria Montessori expresses this in, *The Discovery of the Child*, p. 168. "We should expect normal children to spontaneously investigate their external surroundings, or as I say, willingly explore their environment." When they are so disposed, children experience a new happiness at every discovery they make. This gives them a feeling of dignity and satisfaction, encourages them to go in search for ever new sensations in their environment and automatically makes them observant."

In contrast, the traditional approach is to give the children external rewards for their accomplishments and to equate learning with conditioning. The result is children who are not really interested in their work and who are in constant need of external reward. These children are restless and unsatisfied and discipline problems mount. If this continues into adulthood, they grow into adults who are easily led and are not really capable of independent thought and action. They are always inwardly discontent and unconsciously waiting for some external re-

ward to satisfy them. They have lost touch with their own life. Personal unhappiness and social disorder are the result.

Generally, most of us in Montessori classrooms refrain from giving obvious rewards such as stars and stickers, but there is often a tendency by adults to encourage children to do things to please them. Children often want so much to be liked by their teacher that they are easily influenced when we give or withhold our approval in subtle ways. This is sad for the children, because when one works to win another's approval, or to get some other external reward, some of the vitality of life is lost. The children's integrity is compromised and they become one step removed from the joy of real involvement in their natural work or learning and self-development.

Realizing all of this, why do we sometimes resort to rewards in our classrooms? Is it because we grew up with it and have accepted it unconsciously? Do we feel that it is the only way the child will do anything in the classroom? Are we second hand people? Are we ourselves so abstract and removed from intrinsic reward in our lives that we don't really think it can be a motivating force?

We carry so many assumptions about how children learn! Are we willing to let go of the familiar and explore new ways? Will we give the children the chance to be guided by their inner guides and experience the happiness of intrinsic reward? We must if they are to maintain their vitality and integrity as they grow to adulthood!

I had a great revelation one day! I love to garden and thought it would be wonderful to mulch my garden to save myself a lot of work weeding. I got some mulch and spread it on the garden paths. Unfortunately, there was not enough mulch, so some of my paths remained unmulched. After the spring rains, there were no weeds in the mulched part of the garden, but lots of weeds in the unmulched part of the garden. With disappointment I looked at the weeds and started to evaluate how much time it

would take to weed the paths. To my delight though, when I looked closely, I found not only the weeds, but among them there were lots of lettuce plants and some onions and spinach. It was too early to start these things according to my mental time frame, but apparently not according to the natural time frame. This was a wonderful discovery for me. Also, we had lettuce, onions and spinach much earlier than I had expected.

I spread the mulch because I thought it would make gardening easier for me. While this proved true, I also found that this expedient measure took away some of the delight of gardening and making new discoveries. This whole incident reminds me how we as teachers reward children to make our life easier in the classroom. But what are we doing to ourselves and to the children? Let us look at it very carefully. When we opt for the easy route of giving rewards we deny ourselves the great opportunity to grow and discover new ways of teaching. More importantly, we deprive the children of the opportunity to be guided by their inner guides and to learn through self-discovery.

In their own minds people are always very confident that whatever they do, they are doing in the best interest of the children. Unfortunately, we are looking through a window limited and distorted by our own training, fears, and beliefs. We sometimes do not see the big picture. We do not see the great wisdom hidden within the children and we do not realize that these inner guides are more capable than us of guiding the child's self-development.

There was a finch's nest in the greenhouse right in front of my desk. I was having a delightful time watching the baby birds grow as the parents fed them. One day I noticed that one of them had fallen from the nest and the parents did not seem to be feeding it. I urged my husband to put the baby bird back in the nest. When he tried to do that, the other little birdies got scared. They all flew from the nest, but one was really too young to fly. It just fluttered to the ground and perched

on a plant. I was so sad! How could I do this to the birds? I could explain all I want and let everyone know my good intentions, but the truth of the matter was, I

did not let nature take care of itself. So here I was, watching the baby bird not getting fed. Two days went by. My inner urge was to again help, but something inside me said "wait." On the third day I was delighted to see the parents come back to feed the baby bird. What a sigh of relief!! I wonder if we do this to the children we work with. Our intentions are good from our own perspectives, but limited when we consider the big picture. Seeing the shortcomings of our own lives, we try to hurry the children along in what we consider to be the right direction by giving rewards or punishments. We sometimes don't have the faith or the patience or the humility to allow them to develop naturally and happily.

Learning through discovery is lasting, whereas learning imposed through reward is suffocating. It does not free up the inner soul of the child. Learning aided by intrinsic reward is deeply satisfying. It has the capacity to awaken new channels of exploration that neither the child nor the teachers are aware of. It opens up a new world to everyone involved in education. In this environment, learning springs from within the child. It

is an enriching experience that carries the child through crisis. Problems of discipline diminish as contact with the inner guides increases. This is the process of normalization. Consider this quotation from Montessori. "Discipline is born when the child concentrates his attention on some object that attracts him and which provides him not only with a useful exercise, but with a control of error. Thanks to these exercises, a wonderful integration takes place in the infant soul, as a result of which the child becomes calm, radiantly happy, busy, forgetful of himself and, in consequence, indifferent to prizes or material rewards." The Absorbent Mind, p. 259.

Children who learn in this way grow up to be strong independent adults who do not depend emotionally on others. The inner joy that springs from self-discovery cannot be compared to the results of reward, bribe and cajoling. Through self-discovery, the door to the world is opened to the children!

Once you see the fact that punishment and reward in any form are destructive, you never go back to them. By throwing them out, you yourself are disciplined and that discipline has come out of the freedom of examination.

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A Comparative Chart of Intrinsic and External Reward

Intrinsic Reward

1. Brings forth intelligent behavior.
2. Builds sensitivity to inner guides.
3. Learning is natural, spontaneous and genuine. Leads to self-development.
4. Learning lasts. Requires very little maintenance.
5. Produces individuals with knowledge grounded solidly upon personal discovery.
6. Elevates both the individual and society.
7. The flame of learning springs from within the child.
8. The child experiences lots of moments of Ah! Ha!
9. Leads to a normalized classroom faster and lots of moments of self-discovery for teacher and children.

External Reward

1. Offers blind conditioned response.
2. Obscures children's connection with the inner guides.
3. Learning is the product of coercion, cajoling and suppression. Leads to dependency.
4. Learning is temporary. It requires continual maintenance.
5. Produces dependent individuals, ever hungry for yet one more empty reward.
6. Supports incompetence and denies growth.
7. Depends on others as a source of inspiration.
8. Lots of moments where the child says, "Do I have to?"
9. Unnormalized classroom drains everyone's energies. Discipline problems arise.

Krishnamurti On Education, p. 60, by Jiddu Krishnamurti.

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