

Mistakes and Corrections

Submitted to:

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Dr. Montessori states that there is one thing that an adult guide must “never do and that is, to interfere by praising a child’s work, or punishing him if it is wrong, or even by correcting mistakes (1995, p.244). This raises the question of how do we help children move on if you never correct their mistakes?

In “traditional” schools the method of managing behaviors is that of “rewards and punishments.” The goal in the Montessori environment is for the child to initiate his own work, and persevere to the task’s completion. Spontaneity is considered appropriate, and the spirit experiences freedom as the child is free to express himself. This makes the idea of rewards and punishments unnecessary, and inappropriate. Dr. Montessori points out that:

Prizes we might have abolished without serious protest. After all, this is economical; it affects few children, and then only once a year. But punishments! That is another story. These are given every day. What is meant by correcting exercise books? It means marking them from 0 to 10. How can a zero correct anyone’s defects? then the teacher says, “You keep on making the same mistake. You don’t listen to what I say. You will never pass your examinations like that!” (1995, p. 245)

This leads to the punishment of scoldings. Scolding a child has no positive effect on improving his performance, and have a negative effect on the child. Dr. Montessori points out that

To tell a child he is naughty or stupid just humiliates him; it offends and insults, but does not improve him. For if a child is to stop making mistakes, he must become more skillful, and how can he do this if, being already below standard, he is also discouraged?” (1995, p. 245).

In order for a child to become more skillful, he must exercise and practice with the materials or subjects that he is deficient in. This work must be the result of free choice. The child must practice under his own direction, and be free to correct his own mistakes. The Montessori materials provide this ability to correct mistakes.

Before looking at the “control of error” that is provided by the materials, let us first look at one of the controls—the adult guide. Many adults, in their attempt to be role models to the children in their environments, will try to portray a mistake free image. The teacher’s credibility depends on his always being correct, right? No teacher wishes to set a bad example by making mistakes in front of the children. This leads to the inability to openly admit to those mistakes. Mistakes are, however, a natural part of life. We all make mistakes everyday on our journey through life. Dr. Montessori suggests the adoption of a friendly feeling toward errors, as they are indeed a part of life.

These errors that we make in our daily lives then are in need of correction. Will someone make a mark in red on my behalf if I accidentally break a small pitcher in the classroom while giving a presentation? I certainly will not scold myself. The ability to self correct, then, is that which is needed for our pursuit of perfection. Dr. Montessori states:

If we seek perfection, we must pay attention to our own defects, for it is only by correcting these that we can improve ourselves. We have to face them in the full light of day and realize their existence as something unavoidable throughout life (1995, p. 247).

Perfection then, depends on the ability to self correct one’s own mistakes. In order to self correct, the ability to recognize those mistakes is paramount. In the Montessori philosophy, this recognition is enabled by the “control of error” that is inherent to the materials. Dr. Montessori points out that each child should become aware of any errors that he may be making, and have a means of discovering those errors by himself. The freedom and independence of the child depend on this ability to self correct, therefore each apparatus in the environment must meet “two requirements: (1) that of improving the child’s perceptions, and (2) that of providing him with a control of

error” (1995, p. 249). Dr. Montessori states that “the child must see for himself what he can do, and it is important to give him not only the means of education but also to supply him with indicators which tell him his mistakes” (1995, p. 250).

From this awareness of mistakes, comes a form of interest in the mistakes. Dr. Montessori points out that mistakes create bonds between humans, and the harmony that arises is a direct result of the pursuit of correcting these errors. “The error becomes impersonal and is then amenable to control” (p. 251).

In conclusion, all people make mistakes. It is the goal of the Montessori environment to enable the child to develop the ability to self educate, recognize mistakes, and then self correct those mistakes. This is extremely important for the freedom independence of the child. As guides then, we must cultivate that friendly feeling towards errors, as they will be made recognized. Mistakes can be made surmountable and turned into positives if they are made impersonal and treated as an expected occurrence.

References

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