What Montessori Teachers and Other Educators Believe About Intrinsic Motivation and Rewards

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INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to understand what motivational strategies teachers are using in the classroom. Are educators relying on *intrinsic motivation* (desire to do something for the pleasure gained) or *extrinsic motivation* (participating specifically to receive a reward/praise)? The study will be compared with current research in the field of motivation to determine whether educators are promoting or stifling the development of intrinsic motivation, and whether Montessori educators view or promote intrinsic motivation differently than other educators. This study surveys educators from across the United States for their current perspectives on motivation.

BACKGROUND

In the late 1960s, research on motivation established that using positive reinforcements in teaching was effective. However, more research beginning in the 1990s has found that rewards are damaging to young children's motivation. Researchers agree that children are born innately motivated, but that as children age, their motivation changes.

Studies have found that when young children are rewarded for an activity they already find interesting, their intrinsic motivation for that activity diminishes. Research has also found that praising children can be counterproductive to school performance. In addition, people are more likely to follow through on an activity they feel control over. Rewards can be interpreted as the reason to perform a task, rather than for the mastery of it. This leads to a feeling of being under external control rather than internal. However, interest in an activity is maintained—even increased—when an individual has choices and is able to exercise free will.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What do educators from all fields of teaching believe about the power and effectiveness of intrinsic motivation, and are Montessori educators more adept at keeping intrinsic motivation alive?

METHOD

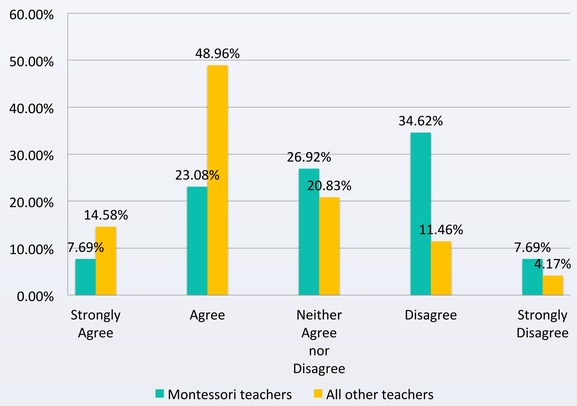
Quantitative research was acquired through the use of a 21-question survey. 121 educators were surveyed through the online survey host Qualtrics. Teachers were asked to answer questions about their experience, the demographics that they have taught in, and their beliefs regarding external rewards and motivation in the classroom.

DEMOGRAPHICS

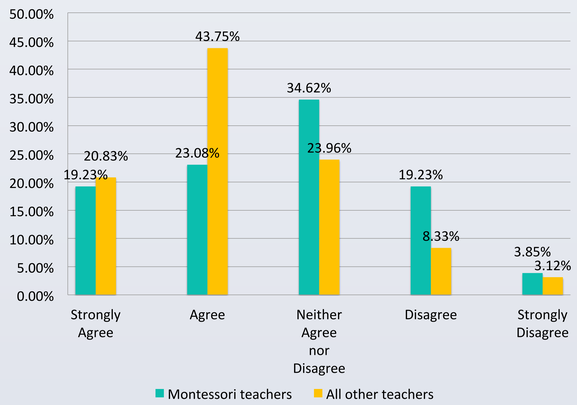
Of 121 respondents, 71% of teachers have taught in public schools over the course of their teaching, while 52% have taught in private. Montessori teachers comprise 21% of respondents. 65% have worked with 3-6 year olds, and 64% have taught in suburban settings. Of respondents, 40% have 15+ years of experience as a teacher, while 9% have 1-2 years of experience.

RESULTS

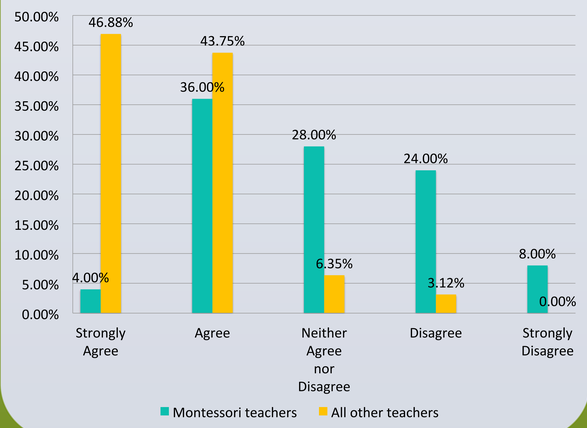
The teacher should have complete authority in the classroom.



A good classroom is based on a student's respect for the teacher.

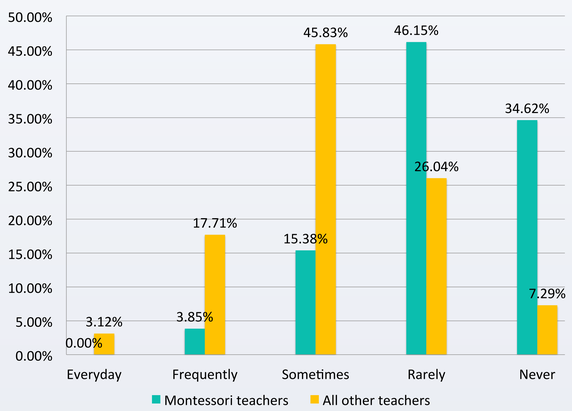


Children like to be rewarded.

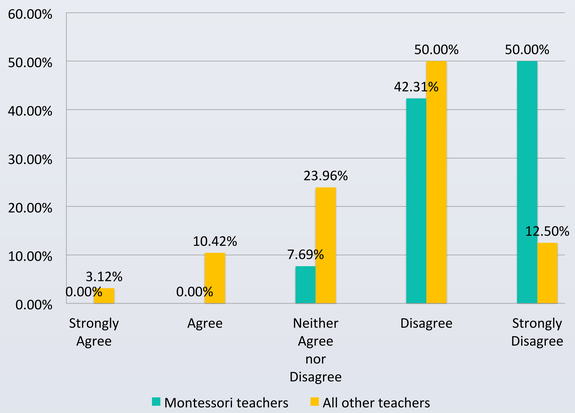


RESULTS

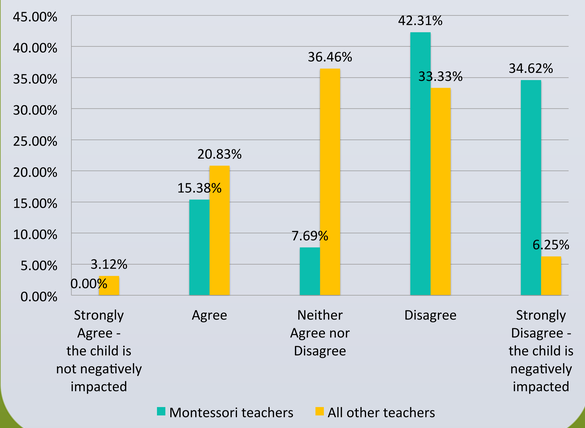
I have used outside incentives in my classroom based on contingent behavior: If you do this (action), then you'll get that (reward).



Children, regardless of age, require outside incentives (rewards, etc.) in order to perform well in academic settings.



I believe using outside incentives has no negative impact on a child.



CONCLUSIONS

When compared with educators from other schools of thought, it is clear that Montessori teachers have different perspectives about rewards and motivation. Results indicated that 81% of Montessori teachers rarely or never used contingent rewards in the classroom, compared with only 33% of all other teachers. Montessori teachers are also 38% more likely to believe that rewards negatively impact a child.

Based on research by Deci, Ryan, Dweck, and others—including this study—it appears highly likely that children from Montessori classrooms are more apt to retain their intrinsic motivation than children from traditional classrooms, as Montessori teachers do not rely as heavily on extrinsic motivators.

Studies have concluded that rewards damage intrinsic motivation, and that interest in an activity is maintained, or even increased, when an individual has free choice. This quality, which any classroom is capable of instilling, comes most naturally to the Montessori classroom.

NEXT STEPS

Further research is necessary to understand what all teachers believe about motivation in the classroom. Studies could use an equal number of Montessori educators and non-Montessori educators to receive further data on educator responses. A new survey could also include how often teachers use praise in the classroom, looking at person praise ("You're smart!"), effort praise ("You're sitting quietly"), and neutral praise ("Good job!").

This study is not a definitive answer to what teachers believe about rewards, how they use them in the classroom, or how Montessori educators approach motivation differently. However, opening up the conversation to talk about rewards and motivation will only further educate and raise public awareness, thereby contributing to building classrooms where children stay intrinsically motivated.

In studying how current educators view and implement extrinsic motivators, researchers can hypothesize how students' motivation will develop. This is especially fascinating given the number of recent innovators in the 21st century who have publicly acknowledged their early Montessori background. Insights into the development of motivation in Montessori educated children may provide an explanation as to where these innovators acquired their persistence and drive. Learning how to keep intrinsic motivation alive in the child will be key to raising self-driven members of society.

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