

Inspiration, Action, & Peace

By Julia Volkman

“We feel, therefore we learn.”

This is the title of a scholarly article written by Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and Antonio Damasio, leading scientists in the field of emotion and cognition. Their research and the work of others demonstrates that how we feel not only guides how we interact with our environment but is also central in our capacity to learn. It is what motivates us to pursue something and what enables us to overcome obstacles that may appear in our path. For example, a great study by Rosalie Fink looked at highly successful people with dyslexia, including a Nobel laureate. She found that they were able to overcome their disability and excel in fields requiring text-heavy work because they were so interested in the subject matter. When a person is emotionally engaged in learning, not only can they work through difficulties as they arise, but they are also more likely to be able to translate that learning to real world applications.

So if we want children to learn, if we want to train their attention, build their memory, and develop their capacity to make sound judgments and take prudent action, we have to help them emotionally connect with the subject matter. It has to be relevant and call to their deepest drives.

The good news is that researchers like Mary Helen Immordino-Yang give free, public talks all the time at universities across the country. And they are also working with the Annenberg Foundation to develop a free on-line course for teachers on Mind, Brain, and Education. This course will be available in July, 2011 at www.learner.org.

When you go to a talk or check out the Annenberg course, you'll get to see the most fantastic pictures of the brain. For example, if a child is engaged in a novel, interesting task, there is a whole bunch of color in the front of the brain (in an fMRI, the colored parts show us where the brain is using lots of oxygen). If they are bored or doing a task that is too hard for them, there is barely any color at all. If they have mastered a task, there is lots of color but more towards the back areas of the brain. But if they are inspired, if they are feeling admiration or compassion for another, they are accessing the front, back, and middle of the brain. There's all kinds of color in all kinds of unexpected places.

So, when we are inspired, we have access to brain real estate that we don't usually get to work with.

Now, think about the children who face challenges. They may have attentional, learning, sensorial, or spatial difficulties. You have at least one of these children in your classroom. If you are really lucky, you have five. Think about what their brains look like when they are trying to do one of the tasks they struggle with. If they are still trying to learn it, the front of the brain will be working. If they are frustrated, their brain will kind of shut down, or tune out—pretty gray. But, if that child is inspired, just like any other child, all kinds of additional brain areas start sucking in oxygen. This means they have the possibility of finding an alternate pathway to get around their weaker neuronal paths. They might literally leverage the extra brain activity

resulting from inspiration and use it to forge new neural pathways; they could build bridges over their gaps.

That is so cool!

I know you have already seen this in action in your classroom. When a child has a “eureka” moment, they are inspired. This happens in large and small ways all day long in the children’s house. We see it when we introduce addition with the number rods and we need to find something the same size as the five rod; the child’s face lights up as they dash off to the red rods. When they come back, beaming, they look somehow taller. But we see it even more tangibly when it involves relationship.

I remember when one of my students, Samantha, saw another girl, Taigan, crying. We had had a grace & courtesy lesson the day before on how you could help a friend who is upset. Samantha scowled when saw Taigan crying. Then, her face literally lit up and she dashed off to the tissues and brought one to Taigan. “I’m sorry you’re upset. Would you like a tissue?” Samantha gently offered. As Taigan nodded and took the Kleenex, tiny little 3-year-old Samantha stood in a posture of great ease and confidence, a smile on her face, and a greatness of breath going in and out of her. She was a giant. That moment created a bond between Samantha and Taigan, two very unlikely comrades.

The face lights up. The body dashes off. The posture and breathing embody ease and confidence. *Inspiration ... leads to Action ... leads to Peace.* When we see this, we know we got it right.

Connecting with the Work

Inspiration, of course, not only comes from within the child when they realize their own capacities, it comes from everyone in the room. As Montessori Guides, we are in a unique position of being able to offer inspiration to children in a myriad ways. We can tell inspirational stories about people we admire. We can read inspirational books about real-life events. Moreover, we can *be* inspiration as we move about the room.

This whole Montessori teaching of being gracious and careful in our movements has its roots in inspiration and awe. Think of Fred Astaire dancing or an Olympian moving with precision and skill. We observe how others are able to master their bodies and we become intrigued. Could we do that? So when we walk on the line or smile as we slowly navigate through a maze of work rugs and tables, we are inspiring the children with our movements.

The art of guiding children to meaningful work can also be an act of inspiration. How many times have we heard ourselves say, “go and find some work.” Well, as Margaret Stephenson is renowned for saying, “if she could find her own work, dearie, she would!” In many cases, the child just needs to be drawn to the possibilities before him. I have seen teachers who simply go over to the area where a wandering child is standing and then lovingly touch some material that they believe the child needs. “Oh, I just love this work,” she says as if to herself. Then she caresses it one last time and moves slowly off, fading and observing to see if the connection was forged.

Now, not that any of us ever has dust on our shelves, but say if you were visiting someone *else's* classroom and noticed some dust, this same technique can apply. This is one of my favorite ways of connecting the 3-year-olds with the environment. I smile as I think aloud and notice a wonderful work, "oh, there are the cylinder blocks." Then I go to touch them and instead, my finger traces the dust. I look with great concern at the dusty finger. "This needs to be dusted," I think aloud. Usually before I can take more than two steps towards the dusting supplies, the supplies are in a child's hand and being put to use.

There is also the old trick of taking out a work that you know the children are neglecting and doing it yourself with great enthusiasm. You will almost always find a small crowd observing you within moments.

Embodying Inspiration

So, this is all well and good but what about the days when your coffee spills, you're fighting traffic, a parent yells at you during drop-off, and then you get peed on. Is it realistic to expect us to be inspirational every day? Well, is it realistic to expect an air traffic controller to pay attention every day? Of course it is. This is the great gift of working with children. At any moment, inspiration is available to us. Sit down, open your eyes, lay down your busy mind, and watch the children. Your heart will open and inspiration can then flood you up.

And if that doesn't work, fake it. Research shows that before the age of six or seven, many children cannot distinguish the nuances of different types of smiles (Gosselin, 2002). Research also shows that the ability of a child to pay attention is related to both the student's motivation and the instructor's clarity, enthusiasm, and drama (Wilson & Korn, 2007). So, just smile and enjoy the ride.

There are so many ways to foster inspiration. We share our stories. We allow for the eureka moments. We move with grace and ease. We notice the beauty of the materials. And through all of this, we patiently wait for it. We pause to allow time for the emotional connection to arise from the depths of the child's being. We pause again and again and again. We smile perpetually. We lower ourselves down over our creaky knees and say, "aww" when a child is having a hard time. We take out the sandpaper letters for the thousandth time and get our whole bodies into tracing the p...again! And just by doing this, all these little acts of every day, we are creating the causes and conditions for our children's brains to ignite.

Being a Montessorian is like being a neurosurgeon: we are directly influencing the brain's architecture. The child's mind is made by the work of her hands...and the work of those hands is inspired by us. Neuroscience and Montessori. Hand in hand: inextricably linked.

For more information on the research on emotion and cognition, visit Mary Helen Immordino-Yang's website: www-bcf.usc.edu/~immordin. For free on-line courses in a myriad of subjects, visit www.learner.org.

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