

CORNERSTONES OF CHARACTER

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The link between independence, choice making, freedom, limits, consequence, self awareness, responsibility, development of the will, mastery and obedience, feelings of worth, equilibrium and harmony of mind and body all arise from concentration upon a satisfying work task.

Maria Montessori placed inspirational faith in the young child - always advocating and believing that the true nature of the child waits to be revealed. Montessori believed that children are 'impressive upstanding citizens at pre school age, and through them true progress of civilization has taken root.'¹ 'By the sixth year, basic behavioral patterns and attitudes have been internalized and integrated into the child's personality.'² The sensitive periods have faded 'leaving indelible traces, by which man will be the greater and which give him the higher characteristics that will accompany him all his life.'³

The Second Plane of Development

The defining cornerstones of character, 'emerging from within'⁴ during the years six to twelve, are the twin supporting pillars of morals and ethics. By the age of six, children's normal unhindered development and their more rational mind, can turn to more philosophical questions, and their 'growing cognitive skills allow the child to probe the reasons behind things.'⁵

The need to escape the enclosed environment of the classroom correlates closely with 'the passage of the mind to the abstract.'⁶ Socially for the second plane child personal relationships are both the wellspring and the lifeblood of morality. His conscience stands out the most and that which is of greatest interest - what is just and unjust.

The six to twelve year old is ready, prepared and willing to be 'introduced to the grand ideas of culture and inspired by the achievements of humankind.'⁷ He is ripe for the finest literature, true stories, historic tales, enriched culture and the child's own imagination advance the development of individual conscience. 'The existence of a moral self, which can become independent of social pressure and judge situations independently, is the goal.'⁸ At this age it is up to the adult to arrange that the moral teachings of life emerge from social experiences. 'Morality must not be assumed to take the form of indignation or moralizing.'⁹

Character in the Third Plane of Development - Adolescence and Erdkinder

'The noble characteristics of adolescence are a sense of justice, and a sense of personal dignity.'¹⁰ The key experiences specified for this age are 'movement, work with the hands, service and civility.'¹¹ Dr Montessori documented parallels between the creative first and the third planes. She recognised 'a period of so much change as to remind one of the first.'¹²

¹ The Secret of Childhood p. 196

² Op. Cit, Ed for Human Dev Page 94

³ Op. Cit, The Secret of Childhood page 39

⁴ Williams, Ita; Moral Formation on the Second Plane; Nurturing and Hindering. Namta Journal OH Volume 30 Number 1 Winter 2005 Page 98

⁵ Rathinde, Kevin; Montessori Education and Optimal Experience: A Framework for New Research. Namta Journal OH Vol 26 No 1 Winter 2001 page 35

⁶ Montessori Maria (1948) From Childhood to Adolescence; Clio Ltd. England Page 8

⁷ Op. Cit, Rathinde K. page 35

⁸ Morris, Professor Ben: Social Learning; Some Aspects of Character Formation Publ; Journal of Educational Review 1958 [Re Published in Readings in the Foundations of Education, Novak Publishing. Sydney. 1966] p.256

⁹ Peters, Richard; Authority, Responsibility, and Education Allen and Unwin London 1963 [Re Published in Readings in the Foundations of Education, Novak Publishing. Sydney. 1966]

¹⁰ Op. Cit, From Childhood to Adolescence page 62

¹¹ The Montessori Adolescent: Analysis and Retrospect NAMTA Journal Summer 2001

¹² Op. Cit, The Absorbent Mind page 18

During adolescence, the values system created during the first plane of development is assessed, in the light of living by those values. The sense of identity, which was first established in the earliest years of childhood is re examined as the adolescent becomes autonomous from parents. During adolescence the young person needs to develop 'sense of genuine belonging and acceptance in a community before they can be committed to its moral precepts.'¹³ This involves passionate questioning, challenging and testing, which is the right of passage of the adolescent with the goal being growing self-knowledge.

General Building of the Foundations of Character

Character can flourish naturally with normal unhindered development. In The Advanced Montessori Method, Dr. Montessori brings to mind the image of foundations for the structure of character. 'There are stepping stones as a one dimensional analogy, but better is the image of pillars playing a supporting role.'¹⁴

Just as physical development spans the Four Planes, and the conquests of independence extend from birth to maturity, so too does the formation of character. As with so many of our human maturation processes one achievement acts as the scaffold upon which the subsequent attribute or skill relies. This same cumulative effect pertains to the 'cornerstones' of character, although the outcomes are often camouflaged and not as visually obvious as physical attributes may be. Consequently, development of character may be considered to have connotations of construction, a process instigated early, but resilient and steadfast, as embodied by an iconic structure such as the ancient Stonehenge, symbolising mystery, strength and endurance.

The stone foundation pillars have been placed as the result of great effort over time and the final structure is not an edifice, but a strong flat-topped stable composition standing in spiritual beauty and equilibrium. These same foundations of character are 'steadfastly raised in each plane of normal development, necessitating freedom of action within a nurturing environment.'¹⁵

Core Components of Character

Children who develop normally, become so, 'courtesy of a combination of genetics, neurology, environment and family life. These children prosper and grow almost effortlessly.'¹⁶ They take on the world with increasing competence, accommodate themselves to others, anticipate their wishes, learn to speak and understand others, learn to take care and responsibility of their bodies, learn to deal with an array of emotions, conduct themselves with expanding tact, sensitivity and discretion. They are optimistic, attentive, communicative, work, and smile. They co-operative, obey, eat well, clean up, and empathize with peers and adults.

By the time this same child attains maturity, we would optimistically hope to recognise an enhanced array of qualities, including honourability, humility, honesty, adaptability, composure, self confidence, and tolerance. He or she would convey spirited attributes of intelligence, effective thinking, rationality, integrity, wisdom, courage, and resourcefulness. This self-aware human being would be loyal, self-forgiving and reveal empathy, compassion, and modesty in his interactions with others. Humour, creativity, intimacy, decency and acceptance, would be internalised qualities contributing to personal identity. The prevailing demeanor of this individual would reflect a state of mind that was ethically balanced, that is, disciplined and yet liberated, non-judgmental, peacefully reflective, kind and generous. Outwardly she would be healthy, self-assured and assume an optimistic outlook and affectionate disposition.

The Hereditary component of Character

The genetic laws of life are governed by the interaction of the chromosomes of two people at conception.

'Thomas Bouchard who studied the inheritance of personality, looked at five traits - neuroticism, openness, amiability, extraversion, and emotionality, and he concluded that about forty percent of the variance in the 'personality scores' was due to hereditary, concluding that genetics does indeed help make our characters.'¹⁷

¹³ Ewert Krocke Larine. The Moral Development of Adolescents: A view from the Farm. Namta Journal OH Volume 30 Number I Winter 2005 Page 123

¹⁴ Op. Cit, The Advanced Montessori Method Page 142

¹⁵ Ibid page 142

¹⁶ Coles, Robert; The Moral Intelligence of Children Random House N.Y. 1997 p. 32

¹⁷ Cohen, David; How the Child's Mind Develops. Routledge Pub. E. Sussex 2002 Page 165

Although a 'human being comes from the simple inheritance of paternal and maternal chromosomes, the acquisition of complete human characteristics requires a human environment.'¹⁸

'The development of character would seem to be a typically psychological activity, although it remains rudimentary if the child is not allowed to *act* in the environment.'¹⁹ The child's basic temperament is either supported or hindered by his interaction with his environment, and the ramifications are quite dramatic.

The second building block of character develops as values, attitudes, traditions, language and so much that constitutes our personality are absorbed and reinforced from the cultural environment from birth to six years. The building of character progresses through the child's own hands-on activity and work. The appropriate prepared environment is critical, as is the prospect of freely experiencing the various facets of real life. The child's character will develop as he has opportunities to plan, judge and abide the consequences of his chosen actions.

The third defining component of character is the individual's moral development - requiring participatory experience in the social world.

'We may want to believe that some people have a 'gift' that allows them the ability to live in the world with ease, flair and confidence, but a different picture is the reality – at some time they have all practiced, practiced and practiced.'²⁰ No one can do this for another.

We believe that all children 'have a tendency to raise themselves up - a continuous tendency to progress, as a guide toward better things.'²¹ And it is often overlooked that the newborn is provided with *all* of the raw materials from which he eventually forms his own character.

Character over the Four Planes of Development

For every human being, 'each period lays the foundation for the one following it,'²² and 'each plane of development 'must be lived through fully in order to pass masterly to the next'²³. But the formative period of the first plane remains critical. If the cornerstones of character have not been laid in place between birth and six years, the child may require great effort of will to emerge with attributes of strength of character.

The First Plane of Development

During this unique and distinctive phase the young child is literally creating his or her personality.

Before Birth

New parents, even before the birth of their child, give expression to their values in ways that will matter to their son or daughter. For example, caring for health, considering diet, and refraining from harmful substances, will have direct consequences for the growing fetus.²⁴

Birth to Three

The child's basic temperament will be either supported in the context of the prepared environment, or challenged. The character of the child is accordingly influenced. Unique personality is expressed very early '

¹⁸ Montanaro S.Q. (1991) Understanding the Human Being Nienhuis Montessori USA Page 50.

¹⁹ Ibid page 129

²⁰ Bilson, Gay; Plenty; Penguin Books Ltd. Australia 2004 page 246

²¹ The Absorbent Mind page 176

¹⁵ Montessori Maria (1938) The Four Planes of Development; AMI Publication Pg 9.

²⁴ Op. Cit. Moral Intelligence Robert Cole Pg 64

by the way we move, communicate, express our security, or confidence.¹²⁵ During the first three years of life, all that a baby absorbs through the senses, moulds the neural circuitry. Experiences in this vulnerable period are particularly critical in 'shaping the capacity to form intimate and emotionally healthy relationships.'¹²⁶ Development of Ego, and Trust are critically influenced during the period from birth to three, within the circle of the family.

Adaptation to culture - By the time he can talk, he is a true child of his culture and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. 'There is no social issue more incumbent upon us to understand than this role of culture in influencing values and character.'¹²⁷

Parenting, Role of the Adult - Practical Goals

- ❑ Establishing rapport
- ❑ Parents need to speak the truth to children from an early age base their world in reality.
- ❑ **Establish consistent *modus operandi*, protocol, and etiquette in the areas of routine, choice, limits, independence, consequence and encouragement.**
- ❑ **Rewards and punish confuse our sense of right and wrong**
- ❑ Pause can be a form of behavioural bribery.
- ❑ **The character of the child from birth to three will be greatly strengthened by the opportunity to work independently with her hands on purposeful activities of her choice.**
- ❑ Basics include 'acting with patience, generosity, fairness and sensitivity; listening with courtesy; supporting acceptable behaviours; giving non evaluative feedback; offering sufficient encouragement to acknowledge the child's actions, but varying the encouragement to ensure effectiveness.'¹²⁸

After three years of life, armed with genetic framework, family love and care and much sensory experience, 'wisdom and discipline are waiting to be awakened in the child'¹²⁹ during the period of the conscious absorbent mind.

The Years Three to Six

3 – 6 is a second sub plane within the First and an age for the conscious worker! Foundations of character, through liberty, work, concentration and the manifestations of 'normalisation' become evident. It was Dr. Montessori who identified that it was particularly 'between the ages of three and six that children construct their own characters by a long and slow sequence of activities carried out by the child himself.'¹³⁰

As the result of thorough observation she also determined that the greatest achievement of the Children's House is to produce self-discipline in children. Self-discipline to many may seem a harsh construct for a four year old, however the inference is that the child is happiest when acting under his own control and exercising his developing will to make choices and decisions. Are we all not more content if our thoughtful decisions are our own?

Further more Maria Montessori advocated that 'after six, the child can no longer develop qualities of character spontaneously. Thereafter, the work is 'on the smoke, not on the fire.'¹³¹ So, the task is defined and the time period finite!

¹²⁵ Orion, Judi; Montessori Under Three; The Foundations of Human Personality. Namta Journal OH Volume 30 Number 1 Winter 2005 pg 26.

¹²⁶ Deveson, Anne; Resilience Allen and Unwin. Australia 2003 p. 42

¹²⁷ Benedict, Ruth. Patterns of Culture. Rutledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. London. 1935 [Re Published in Readings in the Foundations of Education, Novak Publishing. Sydney. 1966] page 91

¹²⁸ Sanders, Matt Prof. Every Parent. Public Lecture 28.6.05 Every Parent Published Penguin Australia 2005.

¹²⁹ Op.Cit, The Absorbent Mind p. 241

¹³⁰ Op. Cit, The Advanced Montessori Method p. 190

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 85

Freedom to Work is the Key

Maria Montessori said ' whoever worked with his own hands has a stronger character.'³² This was an unexpected surprise from the child in the first plane of development. She wrote, 'we have witnessed an eruption of unforeseen and unsuspected manifestations - one of which is the formation of character!'³³

It is a characteristic of the first plane child to come away from work without weariness, full of vigour and energy. Nothing can take the place of this work, not physical well - being, nor affection.³⁴

Normalisation

Both the initial achievement of normalisation and the remarkable return to it, takes effect within the first plane of development. The extraordinary observable manifestations of this state of normalization, such as engagement, self-sufficiency, concentration and love of work, functional independence, ability to choose, responsibility, cooperation, initiative, care of the environment, mastery, and self-discipline, not only contribute but also form the character of the young child at an early age. That is why we can confidently champion normalisation as a foundation pillar, an unyielding cornerstone of character, producing outcomes by the minute, the hour, and the day, the benefits of which carry forward through life as human strengths.

During the years three to six the emphasis upon the value of work in character development cannot be underestimated.

Introduction

Of the many familiar expressions about general character, such as 'He's a bit of a character!' or 'You are a good judge of character' or 'What a shady character,' a certain understanding is assumed about 'character disposition'. Something fundamental is being acknowledged about the nature of our very being.

The meaning of a person of 'good character' may be complex to resolve. We understand character in terms of human development, to mean 'the combination of traits and qualities distinguishing the individual nature of a person.'³⁵

WHO IS TO JUDGE CHARACTER? WE ALL DO! WHEN SUBMITTING CURRICULUM VITAE, ALONG WITH QUALIFICATIONS AND BUSINESS REFERENCES, IT IS ACCEPTED THAT SEVERAL CHARACTER REFERENCES BE AMONG THE DOCUMENTATION, OFFERING REASSURANCE OF SOUND CHARACTER.

We all can bring to mind a child, an adolescent, or an adult with long-standing characteristics including honesty, grace and civility or wisdom. Each of us has a set of values, as our ethical framework, that guides our moral choices. Values are 'built up as the result of an intricate process of development of the individual personality.'³⁶

If we could imagine the qualities of character which together would accrue and consequently develop a human of worth, what would they be? Which attributes and abilities would be sought above all others? Dr. Montessori includes 'a sense of duty, courage, perseverance, unselfishness, and good moral relationships with others.'³⁷

Do humans just automatically acquire 'good character' as they develop from childhood to adulthood? Or is there a means, an approach or a path to follow to allow such a person natural healthy development? Observers of human behaviour, undeniably affirm, that there are quite practical ways, expedient paths to follow, and understandings to appreciate, in each plane of development, which will allow children to develop with strong healthy characters.

³² Op. Cit, Understanding the Human Being pg 128.

³³ Montessori Maria The Formation of Man; Kalakshetra Publishing, Madras, 1975. page 43

³⁴ Montessori, Maria. The Secret of Childhood; Sangam Books Ltd. London 1983Page 195

³⁵ English Collins Dictionary p.1162

³⁶ Montessori Mario M. 1977Education for Human Development; Schocken, NY p. 83

³⁷ Montessori, Maria. (1949) The Absorbent Mind Clio Press Oxford England 1988

However we are certainly not talking about moulding of character or behaviour modification.

Dr Maria Montessori led the way for both educationalists and social reformers when she publicized her observations concerning character development. She placed faith in the natural unfolding and revealing of the true nature of the young child, as opposed to harsh manipulation, rewards and punishment intended to induce behaviour modification. She documented, 'we cannot directly mould individual forms of character, however there is a whole category of duties and solicitudes which we have neglected and on these the life and death of the spirit depend.'³⁸

Values Today

Today in the twenty first century, as the intellectually adroit communication generation ascends to greater heights, greed and materialism have had their impact on our system of values. This confusion in values becomes evident 'when freedom is confused with license, when adaptation is confused with conformism, when discipline is confused with submissiveness, when independence is confused with anti-authoritarianism and equality is confused with uniformity.'³⁹ Strong, responsible, cohesive communities are able to offer support for their youngest most vulnerable members, but it seems that 'when communities fragment, shared values are the first casualty.'⁴⁰

Often employees appear to have to rely upon formal codes of ethics, telling them how to behave and there are classes for personal development! In the business arena, spectacular corporate collapses, often due to excess and corruption, are common. When we hear of educated, prosperous, successful men and women who commit the worst kind of immoralities against others and their society, one despondently wonders how they came to be so lacking in moral values given their privileged positions. As another member of the same society it comes as a form of betrayal. When immorality is a common mode of living, parents, carers, teachers, and commentators on the human condition, most certainly require a timely look at the cornerstones of character.

Societies traditionalists uphold traditional fixed values. However 'tradition is far from being an adequate guide to any values system, as could be evidenced by capital punishment, or child labour.'⁴¹ Through the 'process of critical testing, preconceived ideas and values are shaken and probed, renewed or rejected. The creative, critical energy of man is perpetually renewed through its adolescents.'⁴²

The Fourth Plane of Development - Young Adults Today

Dr Montessori wrote that 'the man of character is the persistent man, the man who is faithful to his own word, his own convictions, and his own affections.'⁴³ These convictions are 'strongly built up stone by stone, beginning at that distant day when the foundations were first laid'⁴⁴ and include persistent work, clarity of ideas, the habit of sifting conflicting motives in the consciousness, the gradual mastery one's actions, and the power of self direction.

Moral sense is not a code committed to memory and requires much practice in daily life. Maria Montessori said that 'he who is conscious of his values is victorious over life.'⁴⁵ Young adults can become visionary citizens of the world, willing to stand up for human rights, aware of global issues and have a tradition of volunteer work, often outside their physical comfort zone. Just as in the first plane, they learn that work is pleasurable and the division between work and leisure need not exist.

³⁸ Montessori, Maria (1918) Spontaneous Activity in Education, The Advanced Montessori Method; Clio. Oxford UK (1991)Page 10

³⁹ Op. Cit, Education for Human Development p. 84

⁴⁰ Mackay, Hugh; Right and Wrong; How To Decide For Yourself Pub; Hodder 2004 Pg 276

⁴¹ Richardson, Garry; Education for Freedom The Gavemar Foundation Publishing. Australia 1985 p 37

⁴² Benedict, Ruth. Patterns of Culture. Rutledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. London. 1935 [Re Published in Readings in the Foundations of Education, Novak Publishing. Sydney. 1966] p. 1-2

⁴³ Op. Cit, The Absorbent Mind Page 183

⁴⁴ Op. Cit, Advanced Montessori Method Page 247

⁴⁵ Op. Cit, From Childhood to Adolescence pa 88

Conclusions

What have we determined of character? The cornerstones of character are genetically, environmentally and interpersonally based. But character building remains the child's own achievement. 'Character formation cannot be taught. It comes from experience and not from explanations.'⁴⁶

From birth to three the child absorbs the customs, morals, and values of his people. This pattern becomes part of him as something creative and potent, giving form to the personality in just the same way as hereditary features of the body are shaped by the genes, or modes of behaviour by patterns graven on the nerve centres.⁴⁷

'The period from three to six is the embryonic period for the foundation of positive lasting traits of character. These are the germinal origins of human behaviour and they can only be evolved in the right surroundings of freedom and order.'⁴⁸ The values created are used as building materials for a unique contemporary ethics structure. They function as signposts to guide us. Margaret Somerville talks of constructing an ethics toolbox, not as an event, but as an ongoing process. 'We must continue to construct a toolbox that will help us to hold safely in the palm of our collective human hand - for both ourselves and future generations - the extraordinary powers that new science and technology are giving us'⁴⁹ but also protect and cherish all that is known to be true and right.

But addressing values in high school is too moralising, and in adulthood too late! No one can do for the child the work he has to do to build the man he is to become.⁵⁰ 'The child, unlike the adult, is not on his way to death. He is on his way to life. His work is to fashion a man in the fullness of his strength.'⁵¹

Dr Montessori envisioned a bright, unsullied new society. She saw a dynamic communal entity made up of individuals with strength of character able to influence the future. Young people with strength of character are welcome fellow passengers in this fragile craft called civilization⁵² and together we will travel with equality, tolerance and peace.

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⁴⁶ Montessori Maria, The Child, Society and The World, Unpublished Speeches and Writings. Clio Montessori Series, Oxford. England. 1979 Page 26

⁴⁷ The Absorbent Mind pg, 172 - 173

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 222

⁴⁹ Somerville, Margaret; The Ethical Canary: Science, Society, and the Human Spirit. Viking Press. Penguin Books. Australia. 2000 P. 300

⁵⁰ OP. Cit, The Absorbent Mind p. 28

⁵¹ Ibid. Pg 27,28

⁵² Orr, David W. From Ecological literacy to Ecological Design Intelligence. Namta Journal OH Volm 29 Number 2 Spring 2004.

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