

CORNERSTONES OF CHARACTER FOR THE PRIMARY CHILD

By Mary Hayes

In *The Absorbent Mind*, that significant work of Dr. Maria Montessori, there are a number of chapters concerned with the topic of the presentation for this morning. I would like to read to you a passage from Chapter 18 - Character and its Defects in Childhood

'The small child has no sense of right and wrong; he lives outside our notions of morality. In fact, we do not call him bad or wicked but only naughty, meaning that his behaviour is 'infantile'. It is in the second period from 6 to 12, that the child begins to become conscious of right and wrong, this not only as regards his own actions but also the actions of others. Problems of right and wrong are characteristic of this age; moral consciousness is being formed, and this leads later to the social sense. In the third period from 12 to 18, the love of country is being born, the feeling of belonging to a national group, and of concern for the honour of that group.

'The more fully the needs of one period are met, the greater will be the success of the next.'

These references to the planes of development indicate to us the most significant guide we have to understanding natural development. It is the manifestations of the child at each stage that tell us what the individual is like, what the needs are and what our response should be if we are to assist the child on this journey of positive growth and development.

The orientation of the child during the years from 6 to 12 is twofold. On the one hand we have to consider the development of the individual and on the other the emergence of social characteristics. In an article called 'The Second Plane of Development' Dr. Montessori said '...the first plane is essentially motor and sensorial while the second plane is essentially moral and intellectual'

From the point of view of individual growth and development there is a great flourishing of the powers of the mind/psyche. The power of imagination must be nurtured positively. Activities offered must engage the use of reason.

These two powers of the mind together make it possible for the child of the 2nd plane to, as Dr. Montessori said, 'acquire all the elements/seeds of culture', this is the plane for the acquisition of culture.

But there is also the interest of this child which is extroverted and directed outwards towards the society and the human community in which the child and his family live. There is an existential need for him to know:

What is society?

How is it organised?

Why is it so organised?

What do adults think?

Why do they think this way?

What would happen if they thought differently?

How can we change this?

And if what adults tell children is actually true?

We really do understand and believe that the 2nd plane child is definitely the child of the society just as the first plane child is the child of the family.

The emerging interest in what is right, wrong, ethical or unethical is closely allied to the social awareness. It is also closely related to the intellectual development of the mind. Dr. M. Montessori talked about this new orientation in these terms. She says this is evidence of the mind of this child concerning itself with human behaviour.

‘Not till six can we become missionaries of morality because it is between six and twelve that conscience begins to function and the child is able to visualise the problems of good and evil. Still more can be done between twelve and eighteen, when the boy begins to have ideals (patriotic, social, religious and the like). Then we can act as missionaries towards him, as we can do to adults. The pity of it is that after six, children can no longer develop character and its qualities spontaneously. Thenceforward the missionaries, who are also imperfect, find themselves faced by considerable difficulties. They are working on the smoke, not on the fire.’ (The Absorbent Mind Chapter 20 “Character Building is the Child’s Own Achievement”)

The Etymology of moral/morality is Latin, from Old French *moralis*, *mos* which means manner, custom, way of life, habit or conduct

Morals are principles and values based on what a person or society believes are right and proper or acceptable ways of behaving. There is a certain element of excellence in the connotation of the word ‘... springing from or pertaining to man’s natural sense or reasoned judgement of what is right and wrong’. We could think of the term ‘Moral Courage’ – duty or responsibility based on what you know or believe to be right, proper or acceptable rather than on what the law or a contract say should be done

Ethics – a particular kind of idea or moral belief, that influences the behaviour, attitudes and philosophy of life of a group of people, it is also the study of moral principles and questions of what is right and wrong.

In an article called Moral and Social Education, M. Montessori writes about society -

‘We see in nature that all associations of animals are composed by different individuals. If we consider bees, or ants, we must recognise that they form a society – a society formed by different individuals who each have their own function. I mention these two examples because these insects have instincts directed towards their own existence and ‘social instincts’ as described by biologists and Maeterlinck. Now when one of these individuals, who is later to become a part of society, develops, the social instincts also develop within him. All this illustrates that there is no opposition between individuality and society; each is closely related to and depends on the other.’

And, in the same article, she writes about morality -

‘... therefore we can consider morality as a form of adaptation to a common life for the achievement of a common aim. Morality, which is usually considered as an abstraction, we wish to consider as a technique which allows us to live together harmoniously. It is necessary to consider morality for it is impossible to conduct life without this technique. This may not seem a very elevated way of considering morality but it is very practical. ... Morality has been considered something abstract concerning adults, not considering the children. Instead we must consider morality as a fact of life, which can be studied in the developing child. It is a fact of life which has different phases following the phases the child passes through. It is interesting to see how the child has revealed it – for this is one of the contributions the child has given us.’

We must ask ourselves, though, out of what bedrock or foundation do moral practises grow. I believe that it grows out of our ability to love, to feel, to empathise/sympathise with others. Therefore it lies in the emotional life of human beings and not in the life of the intellect, or volition/will. We cannot teach children to love, children love in response to a loving environment. Love emerges, therefore as a response, a spontaneous response outside the control of the will. The love bestowed on the infant at birth and in early childhood awakens in him/her reciprocal feelings. An inner sensibility is awakened in the child as a response. This is true of all humans at all stages of life but infinitely more true in infancy and childhood. When talking of this inner

sensibility M. Montessori often uses the word 'soul'. The soul of the child is awakened to love. She talks about 'an inner sense that vibrates'. This inner sense enables us to perceive love, to experience it and then we develop the capability to express and to give love. The inner sense must be awakened, kept alive, nurtured and refined, through our experiences with people and our environment. How we do this is age related.

Like all facets of development it is also related to growing maturity. In this context we think of maturity as a developing awareness of the components of love/hate, acceptance/rejection, of the conflicts in life situations, personal responsibility and how we assume control of our feelings.

How do we respond to this new trait exhibited by the 2nd plane?

Look at our curriculum, designed to foster an appreciation for life itself

The child is introduced to the whole – universe, world and environment, therefore he gets an overall view

Emphasis is on interrelatedness and interdependence

Cosmic education lays emphasis on service – the significant functions/roles of both in/organic elements in universe are cosmic tasks, service for the whole.

Each new element/life form is a new agent for creation

Consider the special /significant place of human beings in creation – both geographically and historically and their special cosmic task

Emphasis is on effort, achievement for the good of all and on service/work

Conclusion –

Children learn the techniques of moral behaviour by living together ... much as they learn language or arithmetic, that is by doing it and not by theorising about it.

Later they make abstractions about morality which is the result of experiences and discoveries

In the 1st plane we have to refrain from doing things physically for them even though the time taken by them may irritate us. The same applies to the 2nd plane child as regards the moral questions. They must develop moral judgement by their own effort and reach mental independence. Part of this is the ability to make judgements concerning human behaviour.

From Moral and Social Education:

'So we realize that in order to develop, the individual needs to display effort, to exercise himself and not be dependent on others. Now this independence is acquired only by an effort. Liberty or freedom is the independence acquired by one's own effort. It is evident that this is a formation, a growth, therefore only acquired by one's own effort. It is the 'valorisation' of the personality, to become aware of one's own value. Without this, as many psychologists say, the child only feels his own value if he is loved. This is another 'valorisation' – he is independent, he is sure of his own actions and knows how to act. This is the basis and law on which the soul must stand. All the rest, sweetness, etc. is secondary in the 'valorisation' of the personality. For the 'valorisation' of the child's personality there must be a very definite basis in social experiences.

This is true for small children and older children. It is only the conditions that change. The older child is no longer satisfied just by doing things for himself. It is not correct to think that the child of seven years 'valorises' himself by buttoning his coat or dusting the tables. It is not sufficient. The past opportunities of social experiences are not sufficient for the older child. We must give a wider scope to the social life. We must allow the possibility to make a great effort.

Bibliography:

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