

THE EDUCATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

by Maria Montessori

Only when we look at education from birth and follow the inner development of the child from the beginning can we truly see the child's psychological progress. Montessori states that personality cannot develop fully without freedom; even the formation of healthy social life requires freedom to associate, not coercion. The early childhood level develops the will, the elementary level leads to social understanding of civilization, and the adolescent level is the gateway to social organization and the fulfillment of the personality.

A characteristic feature of our time is the gap between the high level reached by our outward civilization, which has been rapidly evolving in recent years, and the low level of human development, which has been raised very little since the earliest days of mankind.

In order to re-establish the proper balance, mankind must make a common effort to so enhance the dignity of the human personality that it will reach the same advanced level as the environment that man's labour and intelligence have created.

Education thus has assumed great importance today, and its role must no longer be limited to furthering the progress of material civilization, which may indeed have become too highly developed.

We must make an immediate collective effort to foster the development of personality. Such an effort will not be forthcoming simply because educators advocate it. All mankind must subconsciously be impelled to move forward. Education today operates in the same time-hallowed way everywhere; it follows a single narrow path and therefore cannot bring about the development of personality.

What needs to be done?

It is not so easy to answer this question as it is to pose it. There is no such thing as a singleness of purpose, because there is no clear awareness of what work ought to be done.

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Let us begin by attempting to clarify a few fundamental concepts. Exactly what is personality? The usual descriptions are vague, and a clear-cut distinction must be made between personality and individuality. The basic premises are not well defined, and the main problem is knowing what ought to be developed.

Here, as in so many other cases, we must have recourse to the child and ask him to shed light on what we are trying to understand. Such light can come to us only if we go back to the very beginning, to a point still very close to nothingness. Only the child can guide us, and he can do so only after we have prepared our inner selves to follow him. He will then lead us from nothingness to the beginning, and from the beginning to the development that follows. The child teaches us an important thing that education as a rule has failed to understand and to apply in practice. He has shown us the basis of the entire development of the personality of man, that superior individual whose potential seems almost unlimited and whose personality decidedly does not have a fixed limit set to its development. There is a very practical factor responsible for



Glass walled classroom

this open-endedness of the human personality—the development of individuality, which takes place independently of the influence of other human beings.

The child has shown us the basic principle underlying the process of education, which he has expressed in the words “Teach me to do things by myself!” The child resists letting adults help him if they try to substitute their own activity for his. The adult must help the child do things entirely on his own, for if the child does not reach the point of ceasing to rely on the help of adults and becoming independent, he will never fully mature intellectually or morally.

Psychoanalysis supports this fact and indicates the need for a new psychological approach. Psychoanalysts tell us that a person who is too attached to and dependent on someone else comes to feel that he can do nothing without the help of that person and may fall prey to a number of extremely distressing psychic illnesses. He cannot be cured of them unless he can overcome this psychological dependence.

Individual freedom is the basis of all the rest. Without such freedom it is impossible for personality to develop fully. Freedom is the key to the entire process, and the first step comes when the individual is capable of acting without help from others and becomes aware of himself as an autonomous being. This is a rudimentary definition of freedom and one that appears to be at odds with the social nature of man and the functioning of the human collectivity. How can the idea of individual freedom and that of life in society be reconciled, since the latter is fraught with restrictions that force the individual to obey the laws of the collectivity? The same problem, the same apparent contradiction, seems to characterize our everyday life in society. Yet freedom is the necessary foundation of organized society. Individual personality could not develop without individual freedom.

We find ourselves lost at this point in a maze of contradictions. Only the child can light our path through it. The child is our only guide to what education should be; only he can help us understand the complications of social life and man’s unconscious aspiration to be free in order that he may bring about a better social order. Man seeks freedom in order to build a supernatural society. He does not seek freedom in order to go his own way, but in order to live.

We must call on biology, which has revealed many secrets of life that long remained hidden, if we want a clearer picture of the relationship between the individual and society. Let us reflect on the evolution of animal life. Primitive species of animal life form colonies, in which a number of individuals function as a single organism. An example is the coelenterates. Some members of the colony perform the function of digestion while others defend it against outside enemies. A number of individuals thus functions as a single unit of life in this phylum. The scale of evolution starts where individuals begin to live their own lives.

Only individuals can unite to form a society. Ants, for example, form a society composed of an enormous number of individuals – an impossibility in the case of more primitive forms of animal life.

Separate individuals are complex and are capable of banding together in huge numbers. They may form not only an aggregate, but a real association based on distribution of the labour necessary to fulfil the society's functions. Association takes place when the group engages in collective activities as when birds undertake their vast migrations. They form an association of free individuals.

The fundamental freedom – the freedom of the individual – is necessary for the evolution of a species for two reasons: (1) it gives individuals infinite possibilities for growth and improvement and constitutes the starting point of man's complete development; (2) it makes the formation of a society possible, for freedom is the basis of human society.

We must make it possible for the individual to be free and independent. The key to this complex problem is to furnish means for development of the free personality that have to do with the environment as well. The environment must promote not only the freedom of the individual, but also the formation of a society. The education of humanity must rest on a scientific foundation and follow from it every step of the way.

The first step has been taken in our schools, which have given the child the possibility of teaching us this great, revealing lesson and helping us pursue this goal scientifically. The first step, from

which all the rest follow, is then to help the child develop all his functions as a free individual and to foster that development of personality that actuates social organization.

The drive for freedom, the individual's inherent need to be let alone so that he can act on his own, determines what we call one "level of education". It is in fact the first level of education, properly speaking. In our view this level is the province of the school, the elementary school, for materials that foster the freely organized activity of the child must be furnished. The second level leads to society, to the social organization of the adult. Secondary school should be the gateway to a development of personality and social organization.

These are, then, two levels, or planes, of development of human life if the aim of education is to contribute to the formation of man and his personality, raise humanity to the point where it can make genuine progress, and save mankind.

The aim of this approach is to raise mankind to the same level of development as the environment and thus eliminate the imbalance between them. Education is indispensable not to foster material progress but to save humanity, and all our efforts must be directed toward helping the inner man form himself rather

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than fighting against the outside world. We must ponder long and hard and work to deepen our knowledge of human psychology and education so that they may become a true help to man. The aim of education should not be to teach how to use human energies to improve the environment, for we are finally beginning to realize that the cornerstone of education is the development of the human personality, and that in this regard education is of immediate importance for the salvation of mankind.

If this is what education is, our first concern need no longer be school administration, courses of study, and so on. The school

curriculum will always be an aid in education, but it must not be forced on mankind in the name of some unconscious goal. Mankind must bring the aim of education into the full light of consciousness. Education today does not take personality into account and does not develop it. It is motivated by a point of view that is not only wrong but dangerous, based on a false premise that represents a real peril for mankind. Man today pays no heed to human personality and regards human society as a colony without individuals. He knows only dependence and submissiveness, which kill personality. Our ideas are so confused that we think that there is a contradiction between the free personality and society. We keep asking, "Once there are free personalities, what will become of society?"

We must do away with this misconception, for it puts us in imminent danger. It has come about because we have had no clear notion of what organized society really is. This misconception weaves a web of errors in the way of man's progress and perhaps even threatens his survival.

We are coming to realize that we must give men their freedom, that we must educate the masses, that we must educate all men. A wordless cry has been raised for us to see things clearly as they really are – a cry to defend man.

The levels of education must have a foundation, a human aim – the progressive development of the child's personality, which our experience with him has made us see in an entirely new light; for the child who is free to act and to do so without being influenced by the suggestion exercised by the adult shows us the real laws of human life.

I will discuss the four levels of education that we discern. It was not I who made this fourfold distinction nor was it the child. It is based on the orderly pattern of development. We adults live amid absolute disorder, and we have succeeded in making frightful chaos the basis of our organization of society.

The human being proves to have a fundamental need for order from the very first years of his life. He is eager to live in orderly surroundings, and he disciplines himself when he can act freely and

follow the dictates of his nature. It is not the adult who teaches him this, for the adult has no notion of this sort of discipline, because his development has been constrained. We should remember what the Bible says, "Great things are found among men: kings and riches, but something never seen is inner discipline." This is the cause of the fall of many civilizations.

Discipline is the fundamental instinct of man, as children prove to us. It is a normal need of human nature when it is protected and not deflected from its natural path.

When we speak of the free man we must above all correct some mistaken ideas. It is inaccurate to say that the free man is at odds with society, with order, and with social discipline. If we help man follow the design of normal development and follow his own natural laws, we will bring about a more perfect society than the one we now have. We are against the artificial programmes that make man a slave. This does not mean, however, that we are against order and discipline, which are true laws of mankind. I speak in the name of my Lord, the child.

The child, a free human being, must teach us and teach society order, calm, discipline, and harmony. When we help him, love blossoms, too – the love of which we have great need to bring men together and create a happy life.

The aim of education is not to teach facts; education has remained at an absurdly inferior level by comparison with the progress man has made in other fields. I believe that it will seem inconceivable in the near future that education was so narrowly circumscribed that it made the solution of social problems impossible. There is good reason to regard education as a tyrannical and dictatorial coercion exercised over every aspect of children's lives; this tyrannical power is pointless and benefits no one. It makes even less sense and has even less point in these times when man has such an intense desire for freedom. It is difficult for us even to conceive of the slavery that prevents man from being himself, that cuts off at the very roots the human personality we so desperately need. The simple truth, as our experience has amply demonstrated, is that the laws the child is forced to obey are arbitrary and that he must no longer be sub-

ject to them, so that the laws of life may guide his development. Programmes can be changed; the laws of life are immutable. If we base education on the laws of life, we will create genuine levels of education rather than mere curricula.

Individual freedom is the basis of the first level of education. Our aim must be to make the child capable of acting by himself, as we have already indicated. The adult must be a source of help, not an obstacle. Above all, he must aid the child, never make him the helpless victim of a blind authority that does not take his real goal into account. We must truly help fulfil the child's needs; we must let him do things by himself because his very life depends on his being able to act. He must be allowed to function freely. A human being who cannot carry out his vital functions becomes sick, and we often find that children who are not allowed to develop normally suffer psychic illnesses.

We must not only offer children personal help; we must also provide them with the right environment, for their proper development depends on vital activity in and on the environment. Science has taught us that the aim of the new pedagogy must be to create the proper environment for development. Our position is very far removed from that of many people who think that the adult should not do anything with regard to the child. Should we perhaps leave the child all alone and abandon him?

We who live within supernature cannot live within nature. We have done nothing for the supernature of the child, whereas lower forms of animal life do a great deal for their offspring. The human being who has not been psychologically crippled has very demanding requirements that need to be met if he is to develop his free personality, but we keep the child shut up in our homes and do all sorts of things in his stead when we should furnish him with the means of doing them by himself. The supernatural environment needed by the child and the adolescent must be created for them until they enter our adult social life themselves. It is up to us to construct such an environment to protect our offspring.

This is the mission of education. Let us therefore unite our efforts to construct an environment that will allow the child and the

adolescent to live an independent, individual life in order to fulfil the goal that all of us are pursuing – the development of personality, the formation of a supernatural order, and the creation of a better society. The human soul must shape itself within a supernatural milieu.

The child must therefore have his own special environment and the adult must help him. This opens the gates to the practical realm of education. What must be done? What must the adult do? Stop telling the child little stories? Stop letting children have fun and stop allowing them to participate in sports? People sometimes think that the sort of freedom the child should be given is the freedom to live a terribly serious sort of life, and the one goal of modern education has been to prevent this.

But isn't it possible that life really is a very serious matter? The life of freedom is not at all frivolous, as we learn once again from the child, who seeks to do practical, difficult, and serious things – positive things – and is happy when he can do useful things, for the human being seeks to climb higher and higher and to pursue a definite goal.

Vast instruction and an environment that meets his needs are necessary to develop the human soul and human intelligence, the life of the child.

We have been wrongly accused of wanting to deprive children of joy! But our intention is neither to give them joy nor to take it away. Quite the contrary. The child in our prepared environment does not play. He works, and greed disappears; he works, and laziness disappears. He wants to do everything! He is a precocious human being by comparison with other children. The human individual has demonstrated a tendency to work independently in order to develop his mind, and then love is born and leads to a happy society.

Man does not find happiness in play as an activity apart from life. Those who know how to do nothing else but amuse themselves soon fall victim to depression. Our schools, whose duty it is to make possible the happy life that is man's natural condition, must provide the child with surroundings appropriate to his needs – buildings and furniture on his scale – and at the same time put before him



Mario Montessori and Maria Montessori, 1938

noble ideas and great discoveries of the human mind, offering him in material form the abstractions that are the typical products of the adult intellect so that the loftiest creations of human intelligence may penetrate his mind.

The child must rise to the higher order of the spirit through concrete things. When we put before him the greatest ideas and discoveries of the human mind, he will be stimulated and his enthusiasm will be aroused. He will show a wonderful persistence in his work and never feel fatigue. It is obvious that the individual works hard to develop his own personality. Every human being has his own interests in mind (though perhaps not in any conscious way); every individual acts in his own interest. The child is thought

to be a selfish creature. But he is not selfish in this regard. Selfishness enters the picture only with regard to seeking possessions and power. The selfishness of the child is that of the man who seeks to withdraw from society and dwell apart from others in order to live the life of a hermit and cultivate his own soul.

How can we cultivate human individuality without living apart?

The first period of life is that in which the individual must develop *by himself*, independently. This is the period of self-education. Children naturally feel helpless in a hostile world that overwhelms them. They need protection, not tyranny. When the adult gives the child something, he does so to secure some advantage for himself. This constitutes a form of tyranny. Even when he is free, the child still feels the need for protection. He needs and seeks encouragement; he has no false pride and goes to adults to show them his work. He is pleased if he has done well and pleased to see what he has accomplished. He needs encouragement to go on with his difficult task – the development of his personality, the vital work of an embryo.

The characteristic feature of the education given the child at this stage in his life must therefore be the safeguarding of his freedom, and since he is living in an artificial environment, he must be surrounded by things tailored to his needs. Everything must be child-size, but not in the sense of mechanically reducing the physical scale of adult things. A whole world just his size must be created for the child. This concept may be illustrated by the way religion should be taught to children if religious education is desired for them at this time. Religion should be presented in terms of God's protection of the individual. The child has a guardian angel always watching over him, an angel who is definitely not a tyrant. The child prays God to watch over him and his loved ones. He prays for personal protection. The child knows that there is someone who watches over him, who loves him, who protects him. To a child this is a natural view of God for it is a reflection of his life as a child. This conception is shared by adults who have not fully matured intellectually and who seek in religion only protection. In adults it represents a form of arrested development.

If secondary education, however, is set up along the very same lines as this first level, it goes against nature, for once the child has passed the age appropriate to his formation as an individual he needs to devote himself to the formation of his personality.

The level of education must be changed at this point. The adolescent's social formation must now begin, and the individual must be given social experience.

It is not true that universities are a preparation for social life. All schools today are obstacles to the proper formation of the individual for social life.

How is social education possible if adolescents must remain shut up in a mass prison? The young person then has no such thing as a social life. There are enormous contradictions. Schools do not prepare young people for social life but rather for earning a living. They train young people for a trade or a profession. And all of them exercise their trade or practise their profession like slaves. This really means that we replace true social life with a degrading caricature of it. We cannot keep a society that is threatening to fall to pieces intact with men whose only training is in a trade that will earn them a living. We need *whole men*. Such men will be quite capable of earning their living in a better society, of course, and it is necessary to pass on a rather large body of knowledge to young people directly, for the human mind is very receptive during the formative years. But only the barest minimum of knowledge is given to him, and that is too little. This is a serious error. We must follow a different path.

Young people at present cannot acquire social experience because they are forced to devote all their time to studying. In order for the adolescent to acquire social experience, society must build the right sort of environment for him, a supernature suited to his needs where he can have effective, practical experience of every aspect of social life.

Independence on another level is required at this age, for independence is necessary in social life as well. Young people must perform social functions independently, work, and earn a living. Society must furnish a special environment in which young people

can earn their livelihood. They must have this opportunity because they will one day have to help build supnature. They must therefore be given the chance to spend time studying and practising manual and intellectual skills. But they must not be forced to study every minute, for this is a form of torture that causes mental illness. The human personality must be given a chance to realize every one of its capabilities. Men

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today are forced to take up either a trade or a profession. We might say that those who work only with their minds are *mutilated* men and those who work only with their hands *decapitated* men. We try to create a harmony between those who work with their minds and those who work with their hands by appealing to their sentiments, but there is a need for whole men. Every side of the human personality must function. A young person may have special aptitudes in some direction, but the choice of which aptitudes to foster must be made individually. There will always be individual differences, but they are not paramount. The aim of human development must be a total expression of life, a life superior to ours. Then we will reach a higher level.

That is the third level, in fact, characterized by the preparation of the human soul for work as the vital function that is the corner-stone of social experience. When he enters the workaday world, man must be aware first and foremost of his social responsibility. If he is not, we will have not only men without heads and without hands, but also men who are selfish, who have no consciences, who are irresponsible members of society. In a society such as ours, full of complications and dangers, this is an enormous responsibility. It is therefore necessary to prepare men to be aware of it and to fulfil it.

Universities confer degrees after students have passed examinations, but often the student passes by sheer luck. Society admits into its ranks men of whom it has little knowledge and who have no conscience. The real examinations should be spiritual ones. The student should be asked to demonstrate his ability by showing the kind of work he can do. The candidates could thus prove their worth

and be recognized as men of value to society. They would then have a sense of responsibility and take it as a guide for their lives. But here we abandon the schoolroom and open the gate of life.

The fourth level is life itself. We eventually leave school and the teaching that keeps young people in check, drives them on without their knowing where they are going, abandons them after a specified number of years, and dumps them on to society without bothering about them again. Where will they learn the things they don't know? What guarantee can they offer the society that daily turns out men with deaf consciences – mutilated men?

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All mankind must be united and remain united for ever. The masses must be educated, and education must be available at all times. On this fourth level society must help every human being and keep all mankind at the same high level as the evolving environment and then elevate man above the environment so that he may further perfect it as he perfects himself.

