

IDENTIFYING TRUE NORMALITY IN THE ELEMENTARY CHILD

by Kay Baker

Kay Baker offers a look at the needs and manifestations (observed characteristics) of the developing human being, specifically of the second-plane child. She outlines key ideas in thinking about these needs and manifestations and discerns the pedagogy associated with each. She emphasizes that the pedagogy/practice must meet the needs of the child. She discusses the tools available to the adult in assessing their own practice: First, there is observation to inform; and second, the four planes of development and fundamental needs of the human being provide a framework. As it is the child's work to construct himself through activity, it is the adult's work to awaken the interest in the child that impels him to work: "What can hook the child and result in action?" What will inspire the feeling of interest and curiosity to fuel continued work? Her conclusion is beautifully simple yet deeply profound in that it is the goal toward which the practitioner constantly strives.

One of the most interesting thoughts of Maria Montessori is the idea that an adult could effectively guide the development of a child if the adult would base this guidance on the normal development of the child. What is normal development? It is development specific to the human being. How does one know the components of normal development? Montessori suggests a scientific approach initiated by observation and confirmed by application. A pedagogy emerges that informs practice and leads to normal development. That is not

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to say that normal development is easily observed. Nevertheless, an analysis of observations over time and space is an essential component of the pedagogy.

What then is the theme to be discussed? It is to explore the following questions:

- What is the pedagogy that supports meeting the needs of development for a human being?
- In particular, what are specifics of a pedagogy for meeting the needs of the development of the child in the second plane of development?

DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMAN BEING

First of all, consider the development of the human being. This is of interest to human beings. The most casual observation reveals developmental changes in the course of a human life. One can't help but notice, wonder what is happening, and then subsequently seek to know.

There are many aspects to development. These are observed to be both of a material/visible and a spiritual/invisible nature. (How these are intertwined is another potential area of interest.) Development as used here means changes over the life span of an organism. What are these changes and how and when do they occur? If we are interested in developing a pedagogy, then we have further questions. What changes occur without intervention? What changes occur with intervention? Are there changes that are beneficial that require intervention? Are there changes that provide more benefit than others? If there is no intervention, is the development flawed? What is positive intervention and what is negative intervention?

Human beings have been seeking the answers for as long as they have been on Earth. I can imagine the parents of an adventuresome child wondering how to orient the child to what it takes to live while keeping the child safe. I can imagine the parents showing their child the beautiful sunset or showing them the stars at night or speculating whether the hunt will give them enough food for the winter.

DEVELOPMENT: OBSERVATION ASSISTS PEDAGOGY

The goal here is not to discuss development as such, but to explore a pedagogy for meeting developmental needs as revealed by observation of the human being. The framework will be that provided by the observations and insight of Maria Montessori.

Maria Montessori brought to the attention of the world that one needs to observe the child in order to uncover the developmental needs of the human being. It is interesting to note that in her book *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori looks forward, adding that this might result in a “new civilization.”

Today it is impossible to go deeply into any branch of medicine or philosophy or sociology without taking account of the contribution brought by a knowledge of child life....In the mind of the child we may perhaps find the key to progress and who knows, the beginning of a new civilization. (3)

Therefore, a pedagogy must include observation that leads to a knowledge of child life.

- What keeps a child alive?
- How does a child think?
- What do they think about?
- What drives the child to work?
- What keeps a child at work?

A continuing process of generalization from observations is needed. Observers must pool their observations. Teachers must observe, record, analyze, and repeat to see what does work. Researchers need to analyze and disseminate what might be useful to pursue.

FOUNDATION OF THE PEDAGOGY

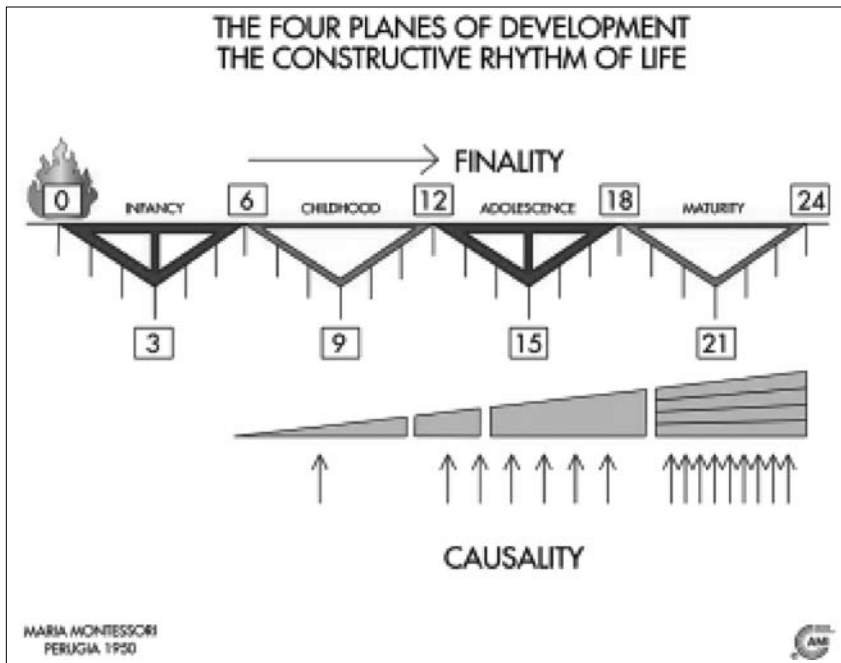
There are two aspects to the foundation of Montessori pedagogy. One is the *four planes of development*; the other is the *fundamental needs of the human being*. The four planes is a theory of stages or levels of development from birth to maturity. The theory identifies the levels and their characteristics. Fundamental needs theory is concerned

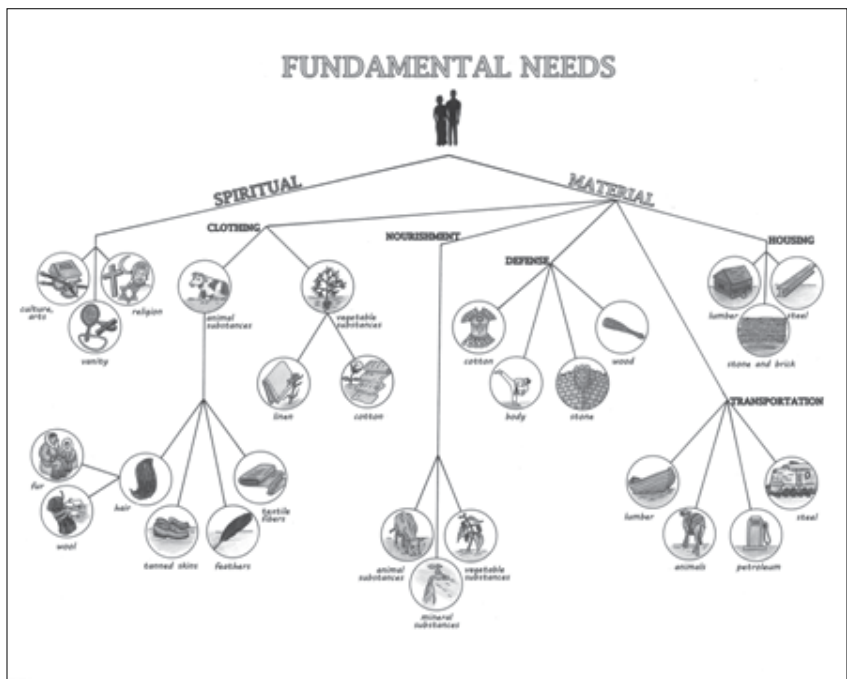
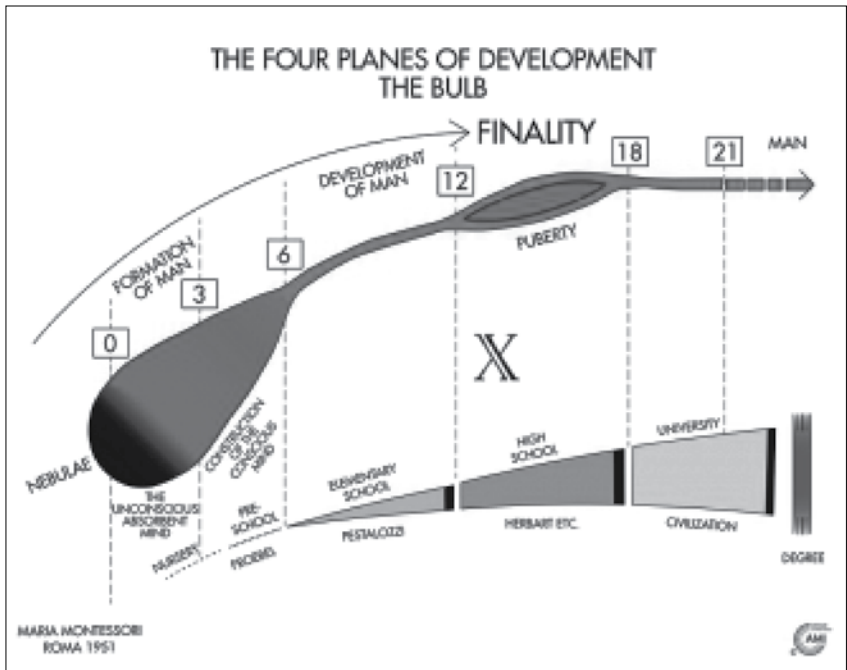
with identifying and responding to what is required to maintain the life of a human being.

Our method has been based on the fact that we have been guided by the manifestations of children at different phases of growth. Each of these may be considered a level or a plane. On each different level of life there are different needs and there are different manifestations. (*The Four Planes of Education* 1)

The consequence of mentioning “different needs” and “different manifestations” is that one must pay attention to these different needs and manifestations in order to formulate a response to them. It seems intuitive to design a response to meet observed needs. It also seems intuitive to engage the nature of the human being in meeting these needs. The adjective *different* is a large clue to the pedagogy. Knowing the differences in the planes allows the design of the pedagogy to be supportive of normal development.

Montessori provided visuals for the needs and manifestations of the human being in her charts of the Four Planes of Development and Fundamental Needs of Human Beings.





The theory of the our planes presents the idea that manifestations of development are different over time. The four planes will not be examined in detail except to call them to mind as guides for realizing a pedagogy. One must acknowledge different needs and different manifestations over the years in order to serve the development of the human being.

The presentation of fundamental needs highlights the idea that the human being has both material and spiritual needs. The most important aspect of fundamental needs is that any pedagogy must not only address the differences in development over time but that the pedagogy is directed to meeting the needs of the human being. The pedagogy is only effective if based on its purpose: to meet needs.

Design of the Pedagogy

An effective pedagogy is therefore designed for its purpose. It seems intuitive that the needs of survival are present throughout the four planes and beyond. These needs that maintain life are both known (food, water, clothing, shelter, defense, movement) and to be identified (what kind of food and how much, what constitutes defense, what kind of movement). The pedagogy must be linked to meeting physical (material) needs. Meeting these needs is critical because development only occurs for the living human being.

However, the spiritual needs are also fundamental and present throughout the planes. These needs take a leap into the abstract. These are what are called *spiritual needs*, needs that provide the living organism with what it takes to fulfill the mission of the organism, thus making them fundamental.

In what way are these needs abstract? Consider a child asking, Why is the sky blue? This is a simple question. The answer has a scientific explanation. What is remarkable is that the question is asked by many children over time, space, and culture. Given that children of a similar age ask similar questions, then what is the deduction? Devel-

The child has to work at the task of forming his being. While nature provides the impulse to be active, to work, and the adult provides the environment in which to work, only the child can become by means of work in that environment.

opmentally, a need for understanding phenomena observed in our environment is present in the human being. Although the human being may not physically perish from lack of understanding, the mission of the human being may perish. Therefore, the pedagogy must be linked to meeting the spiritual needs of human beings.

It is now time to narrow the focus of this paper to the second plane of development, the second stage of childhood. This plane consists of the period of life roughly from age six to puberty. Physical changes often signal the beginning of this plane: loss of baby teeth, longer limbs, loss of chubby cheeks, and coarser hair.

PEDAGOGY FOR THE SECOND PLANE OF DEVELOPMENT

There are many manifestations particular to the second plane that influence the pedagogy. However, this paper will concentrate on meeting needs. Montessori lists three needs of the child at the second plane.

The three characteristics we have just isolated for examination—the child’s felt need to escape the closed environment, the passage of his mind to the abstract, and the birth in him of a moral sense—serve as the basis for a scheme of the second period. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 17)

These needs are clearly in the spiritual domain. The child of the second plane needs to extend beyond the borders of the family and immediate environment. There is a great need to develop the mind, to understand, and to reason. The child needs to know the norms of society in order to live with others and cooperate with them in order to achieve the human mission. The pedagogy of meeting human spiritual needs is based on inferences derived from observation.

Outlining the Pedagogy

The question of specifics of a pedagogy that meet the needs of the second plane of development is now to be addressed. The pedagogy for the second plane will be based on Montessori’s stated needs. If in doubt, test the details of the pedagogy against these needs.

There are several ideas that are often discussed with reference to pedagogy/practice that will be addressed. These ideas are woven

into the idea of development throughout the four planes. But here the discussion will be limited to the second plane.

- Building a foundation
- Self-construction and work
- Interest and choice
- Concentration versus centralization
- Effort
- Independence

Examining these ideas can guide us to formulate a pedagogy to meet the needs of human beings in the process of development.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

In meeting the needs for a developing human being, recall that physically we become bigger and stronger in order to be able to do the tasks associated with living. In a similar manner, we become more knowledgeable and capable in order to do tasks associated with living.

We know that the child of five will have reached a certain level of intelligence and the child of eight another. (*The Secret of Childhood* 206)

That is to say, each plane of development is a foundation for the next plane. The goal is to meet the needs as fully as possible so that the physical self is strong and the mental self is knowledgeable enough to be able to meet the needs of the next plane.

Optimal development for each plane is obviously the burning question. What is optimal development? Is this a phrase akin to perfection? Is perfection achievable? Does it perhaps mean “best possible”? Who decides? Is optimal development observable? Again, this is another line of inquiry. Let us examine elements of a pedagogy associated with “building a foundation” in one plane for the next plane.

What Is the Associated Pedagogy?

Looking ahead to the second plane of development, the foundation that is needed is security and trust in society. How is this achievable? Parents provide an environment that is safe, secure, and loving. Adults provide a safe, secure, and loving environment that includes people not biologically related to the child. Both environments need to be free of caprice, uncertainty, and fear.

Another foundation built in the first plane is strength, physically and spiritually. The child's environment must contain opportunity for physical movement and the development of gross and fine motor skills. The environment also includes opportunity to become knowledgeable, to become aware of the mind, and to develop language and use communication skills.

The foundation continues in each subsequent plane. An environment of love and security must continue; knowledge and skills associated with living must be continually strengthened. The pedagogy associated with each plane is in keeping with the observed "different needs" and "different manifestations" of the plane.

SELF-CONSTRUCTION AND WORK

Montessori's use of the concepts of *horme* (activity directed toward a goal), tendency (propensity), and finality (being settled) is illustrative of her thought that a living being is guided by an internal mechanism that impels to development.

Thus, through indefatigable activity, made up of effort, experiences, conquests and grief, through harsh trials and wearisome struggles, he, step by step, fulfils his difficult and glorious task, adding always new forms of perfection. The adult indeed perfects the environment, but the child perfects being itself. (*The Secret of Childhood* 206)

In this quote, I see a problem in a pedagogy that is based solely on these ideas.

- Follow the child.
- Allow the tendencies to operate.

- Guide the child in ways that are consistent with the characteristics of the child.

It is, rather, that the pedagogy needs to incorporate the untiring activity along with the effort of the child so that the difficult and glorious task of development is optimal.

Again, in the physical realm, it is intuitive and easily observable that the human being is alive, undergoes a sequence of growth, and has a life span. The human body builds its own cells and in that sense self-constructs.

What self-construction means in the spiritual realm requires a leap into the abstract. What is the mechanism of memory? Of imagination? Of thought? Of learning? Of creativity? What is effort? Whatever the mechanism, it is observable that these powers are present in the human being and do develop. Moreover, the development occurs for the person. Something—self-construction—happens that is unique to each person.

What Is the Associated Pedagogy?

- Support the physical parts that contain the input devices of the human being. Protect the ears, eyes, hands, nervous system, nose, tongue, vocal cords, skin, and brain. These physical elements are important for information to be perceived and taken into the mind. For that reason, the environment must be prepared to protect the input devices of the human being. This is a community responsibility: parents, schools, local governance.
- Since so much of the input mechanism of the human being is physical, physical objects must form the greater part of the environment in the developmental stage. This is especially important in the first and second planes but must also be available for the third and fourth plane insofar as physical/visual objects support the thinking and comprehension process.

- As further support, the child is guided to become aware of the body/self and its functions: legs for walking, hands for doing, eyes for seeing, mind for thinking. What are details of these functions? What can hands do? How do hands work? What is thinking? What conditions are needed for thinking? (What distracts? Can one learn to tune out distractions? What is ADHD? What are other obstacles to using the body/mind?)
- Information has to be available in order to be perceived. A multisensory approach is needed so each individual can gather it with one's individual profile.
- Adults guiding the child need to be well-informed and willing to pass on information. Other skills needed by the adult are flexibility and spontaneity. The adult needs to have information along with a "bag of tricks."
- Time has to be available for receiving information. Setting aside sufficient time is a developed skill. Limiting what is being conveyed is also a skill.
- Time has to be available for processing information. At no point in the process of development and adaptation is information directly injected. The mind develops at its pace. There is no part of the developmental process that does not require work, whether unconscious or conscious.
- The child has to work at the task of forming his being. While nature provides the impulse to be active, to work, and the adult provides the environment in which to work, only the child can become by means of work in that environment. So a pedagogy that supports self-construction has to include more than the opportunity for work. The child needs to become conscious that work is to be done and, furthermore, requires effort. The child needs to be informed that work has its trials and tribulations.

INTEREST AND CHOICE

There are questions that come to mind.

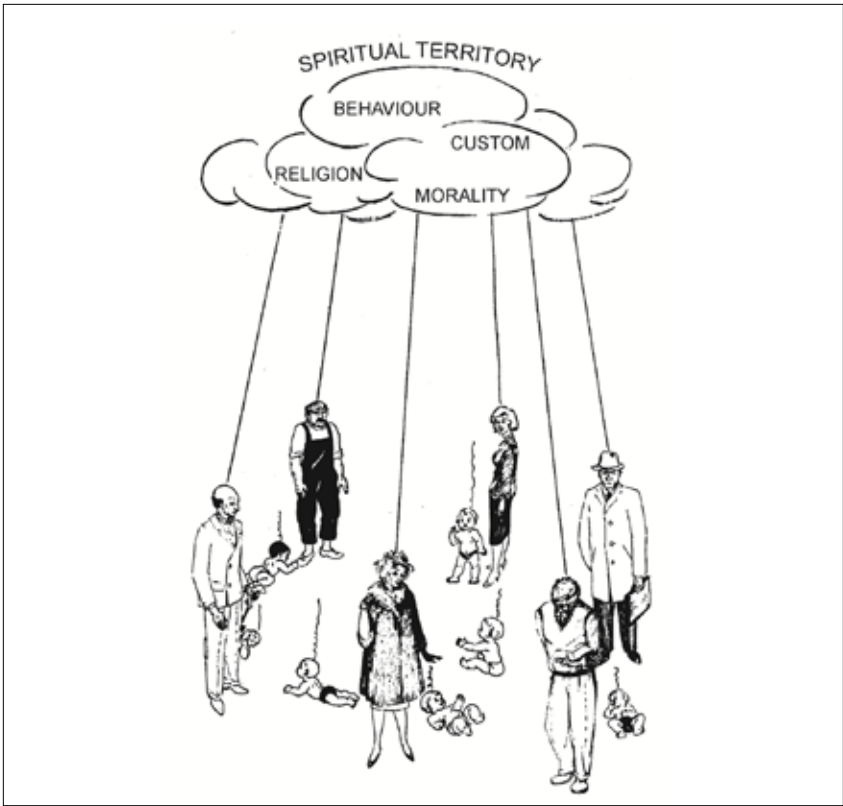
- In the absence of internal voices delivering instructions, how does the process of undertaking appropriate developmental work begin?
- What does “child life” have that takes the place of internal voices that compel to action?
- If a person is to self-construct from an internal mechanism that cannot be directly accessed, how is the adult able to assist the process of development?
- How is the child to respond when, absent of a context, the question is posed “What would you like to do?”

Child life has feeling and emotion along with the reasoning mind. If one has any doubt about the role of feeling and emotion in Montessori pedagogy, this doubt is erased by the role of “interest” in development. Here is one excerpt with respect to the child in the second plane of development.

The secret of success is found to lie in the right use of imagination in awakening interest, and the stimulation of seeds of interest already sown by attractive literary and pictorial material, but all correlated to a central idea, of greatly ennobling inspiration—the Cosmic Plan, in which all, consciously or unconsciously, serve the great Purpose of Life. (*To Educate the Human Potential* 1)

It seems clear that the child is not necessarily full of interests that emerge on demand but that the secret of success lies in an awakening of interest. There is interest to be had but not known until such time as a catalytic factor is in place, that factor being the cosmic plan. The cosmic plan is delivered by the adults in the child’s life.

The word *interest* refers to the feeling of a person whose attention, concern, or curiosity is particularly engaged by something. Montessori puts a particular value on the idea of interest with reference to



development. In effect, Montessori's approach is through the arousal of interest in the child. Not the need to know or to understand, but only a feeling engendered by "something."

For a short time, feelings impel to action and it is the hope that the subsequent work on the "something" will result in attention and more curiosity, thus continued work. This is the *hook* idea. What can *hook* the child and result in action? We hook the child by awakening interest first. Then we can do whatever needs to be done after getting their attention and arousing feelings. This makes sense with regard to responsibility in that responsibility builds over the years but the child needs to work before responsibility fully emerges

Here again nature plays a role. A child is typically interested in what surrounds him: the pots and pans, the worm in the garden,

the moon, the clang of measuring spoons. It is the work of the adult to analyze and turn this interest into a developmental experience for the child. For example, the child sees an earthworm; the adult speaks about the worm, "The worm is like an underground plow hollowing out and loosening the soil so the roots of the plants find it easier to grow." The affect of the storyteller is an important part of this process of awakening interest. No matter the content, the story can awaken interest, in this case, an animal, what happens underground, roots that need room to grow, and what is a plow. Of course, the child's previous experiences are used in the process.

As a child responds to a personal feeling, it will be quite noticeable that the response has been chosen by the child. Rarely will a group of children all respond to an experience with a feeling that impels to action. It seems that the younger the child, the more that choice is *the* determining factor in work. The younger the child, the more likely the child will be doing individual work alongside colleagues. The younger child may also draw inspiration from seeing the interests of others.

The older child also benefits from being allowed to choose from interest but is also able to work from responsibility. Interest may make a work more personally engaging, but it is not the driving force that it once was. The older child is influenced heavily by the social group and a child may take on the interest of another while reaping the benefit of social development. Again a necessary life skill is an ability to recognize another's interest and cooperate in the work that follows.

What Is the Associated Pedagogy?

- While one could not live in an atmosphere charged by emotion, the role of emotion in learning is important for initiating work. It is a spiritual response to an experience that stirs up the will to act. Montessori's use of impressionistic stories and charts/timelines is another aspect of the role of emotion.
- Because emotion is fleeting, exploratory work built on a first response must be available and encouraged. "Can I do that?" is often heard from elementary

children. The response of the prepared adult in a prepared environment is “yes” and here are the materials to do it.

- As the child grows in responsibility, interest and choice may take a back seat. Who has not said or at least heard, “After you do the required work, then you can choose.” This approach is ultimately a mistake. Interest and choice should form part of the work of a human being in every phase of life. “Follow your dream.” “What color is your parachute?” The adult has to explore means of using the imagination to stir up interest or resurrect a dormant interest.
- However, there is necessary work. It is desirable to include interest and choice in all work, even if the work is required. Interest (a feeling) can be fostered by the interest of another. Choice is the more problematic. If a work is required, then where is choice? But choice may enter in the timing, the choice of work partners, or in the format of the work. In fact, if we are preparing a child for life, limited choice is usually what life offers.
- For the younger child, interest and choice are the starting point. For the older child, interest and choice get blended into the required work. This is why Montessori talks about the “inspired” elementary teacher. The adult needs to spark the interest in what can be known. If one is going to inspire a child, give them the inspiration of the planet and its furnishings and not the inspiration of “nonsense.” The message from the adult is that there is interest to be had. It is not that the child must be interested in what is being proposed, but that there are interesting things to be known.
- In the midst of what is essentially all required work whatever the plane of development, it is the work of the adult in elementary to provide a framework

with the Great Stories and to provide the details of the universe in an interesting way. But this is not enough. The child has to work in order to achieve self-construction.

- The pedagogy for elementary also consists of key lessons. This is their function: to bring forth the interest that leads to engagement, attention, and a continuing curiosity. For one example, in her book *Psychoarithmetic*, Montessori creates a “Quotient Exchange” board. This is an elaborate large board used to record the quotient digits for a division problem. This board hangs on the wall. It is her way of honoring what is the most important part of the process. How much does a unit receive? What child would not want to do a division problem and enter the quotient digits on this display board? In multiplication, she calls the product the “winner.” Who would not want to find out the “winner”?
- In this area of arousing interest, one can only say that any adult has personal interests and these may be easy to pass on. In addition, the adult guiding the development of a child in the second plane must develop an interest in the cosmic plan, the plan that Montessori says serves the great purpose of life. That is what the adult guiding a child is asked to do—assist the life of the child to find meaning in life.

CONCENTRATION VERSUS CENTRALIZATION

Not only do we want children to work, we desire them to work with concentration. Concentration is defined as intense, close mental application and complete, exclusive attention to one object. Given this definition, is it any wonder that we are baffled about how to achieve concentration in a child and, in fact, in every child?

What is Montessori’s guidance?

It is certainly necessary to centralize the interest of the child, but the usual methods today are not effective to that end....

How can we force the child to be interested when interest can only arise from within? It is only duty and fatigue which can be induced from without, never interest! That point must be very clear. (*To Educate the Human Potential* 9)

Montessori speaks about centralizing the interest of the child in the second plane, and I would choose the idea of centralization rather than concentration for this period of childhood. *Centralize* has the meaning of draw to or gather around a center or to bring under control. The idea of bringing the intelligence under control seems in keeping with meeting the need of the second-plane child to develop the intellect by passing into the abstract.

The words we use do in fact impact our expectation. A child concentrating brings forth an image of the child deeply involved in work to the exclusion of others. A child working at centralizing the intelligence evokes many images, some of which are discussing strategies with colleagues, or helping another, or working on a group project with or without talking. Of course, the child could also work alone for some periods of time.

What Is the Associated Pedagogy?

- Cosmic Education is the proposal for meeting the needs of the child to centralize the interest. What arises from within is eagerness to know everything. The child is given a framework of the cosmic plan, then it does not matter what is given to the child. All that can be known evokes a feeling of curiosity for a child of this age. This is what Montessori proposes when she says to give the universe to the child. We need not waste time on uncovering specific interests of the child. In our great stories and key lessons, we respond to the overall interest of the elementary child, which is to know that which can be known of an expanded environment.
- Centralizing the interest around knowledge of the universe means that the child is informed of this center—all that can be explored is contained within the universe. Details then are related to a

larger scene and can make sense for a human being whose very being needs to make sense of things in order to live.

- Again, there is no distinction of optional versus required work. It is we adults who make this distinction and induce duty and fatigue. The child is indeed as interested in the decimal system and its operations as in drawing.
- In conferences with children, the adult helps the child to put effort into that which will allow them to lead a life in society. That is to say, the child needs to know what is needed to live a life. You need to be literate, numerate, and able to communicate to others. It is not that this is required by society so much as it is required because you are a human being living in present culture, both immediate and global.

EFFORT

There is a catch. What is presented to the child needs to be presented as a discipline. There are specific things to know and one needs to exert an effort in order to learn. A definition of effort is physical or mental exertion, usually considerable when unqualified. So in the matter of drawing, there is effort required to learn about perspective, proper use of pencils, compass, colored pencils, and acrylics. Memorization of facts is part of achieving facility with numbers. Effort is needed.

There is a reason for showing the child appropriate use of material in any discipline because it allows the child to become acquainted with effort and the trials and tribulations that accompany self-construction.

The rewards of exerting effort are ease and facility in living.

What Is the Associated Pedagogy?

- Model for the child what it means to exert effort.
- Speak to the child about effort. A child often knows physical effort but is less acquainted with mental

effort. The absorbent mind had been a great help to the child in the first plane, but the mind has now turned to the universe and cannot be absorbed in the same way. Now reasoning is required. Understanding certain ideas before progressing to the next step is also needed.

- Do not leave the child thinking that some disciplines require less effort. It takes an enormous effort to become either a musician or an astronomer or an effective project manager.
- Retention is needed for the reasoning mind to work. Integration of ideas is needed. Montessori talks about “rummaging” in the mind when faced with a problem to solve.
- Allow the child the time and space needed for exerting effort.

INDEPENDENCE

Of what use are self-construction, learning, and development? One might say that the concept of finality leads the individual to an independence that, in turn, leads to fulfillment of that individual personality.

From the title of Montessori’s book *To Educate the Human Potential*, one can infer the following:

- Montessori’s thought was that there was a way to intervene in the developmental process.
- Intervening is beneficial.
- There is a human potential, unspecified. It must remain unspecified else the intervention is limiting rather than servicing.

But there are conditions placed upon the interventions (115-119).

- The teacher must get rid of the illusion of omnipotence.

- The teacher must become a joyous observer.
- Obedience (of the child) without an awakened and exercised will leads to disaster.
- The absence of choice is not an option. It is a fallacy to think that one is cultivating the development of the will while at the same time controlling the activity of the child.

What Is the Associated Pedagogy?

- Accept that life is a risk. If we give up control, some situations will result in failure. Yet failure also provides a hint to a path to success.
- Control is different from limits set upon one who has not had the experience or good fortune to know the dangers.
- Limits are positive when set by the inherent controls in the environment and in the “control of error” built into the objects of the environment.
- Unreasonable and arbitrary limits are detrimental to the development and exercise of the will, also known as independence.
- Limits are released as knowledge is obtained. It is here that most anxiety occurs. Was that knowledge sufficient? What other influences come to bear on the judgment of the person? One cannot avoid risk.
- A dispassionate attitude, one of calm and devoid of bias is needed.
- One could go the negative way and say this is impossible. One could go the positive way and say that knowledge empowers and that development of the human power of discernment leads to favorable exercise of the will.

- Giving up control is what is needed. What the adult cannot give up is passing on knowledge before one passes to oblivion.

CONCLUSION

The simple description of a pedagogy permeated by the thought of Maria Montessori with regard to the child in the second plane of development is the Cosmic Education plan. Tell the great stories and present the key lessons. Prepare an environment with limits that become unnecessary as the child grows in knowledge.

Make decisions based on observation, not only by curriculum. Love yourself. Love the child. Develop an attitude of forbearance because all people make mistakes. Keep communication thriving else there is no way to convey forgiveness when that is necessary.

He or she joins the happy group of men who have taken the road of life. As surely as the scientist, they penetrate life's secrets, and, win its rewards, not only for themselves but for all. (*To Educate the Human Potential* 119)

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