Freedom and Discipline

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January 8, 2007

Within our society, discipline and freedom are two concepts that are generally considered to be in opposition of one another. Within the Montessori philosophy, however, these two concepts are very much inter-relational. Dr. Montessori, as always, gives credit to the children in her charge for discovering a path upon which freedom and discipline can work together, as evidenced in this anecdote from *The formation of Man* (1994):

> I remember how a Minister of State, without bothering much about the feature of spontaneity, once said to me: "You have solved a great problem, you have succeeded in fusing together discipline and freedom-this is not a problem which concerns the government of schools only, it concerns the government of nations. Evidently, in this case also, it was understood by implication that I had had the power of obtaining such results. It was I who had solved a problem, the mentality of people could not accept the other possibility, that the nature of childhood can offer a solution for a problem which we adults cannot solve-that from the child came the fusion of what our mind conceives only as a contrast (pp. 28-29).

In order to support this concept, the exploration of discipline and freedom is required. Discipline can be examined in two subsets: outer and inner discipline. Outer discipline is that which is imposed by the adult. The adult manages the behavior of the children through managing their environment. This includes the atmosphere of the room, the physical arrangement of the room, and the quality and care of the materials. Elements in the classroom that will build discipline are order, meaningful work, social interactions, and precise materials that maintain a control of error. The adult also is responsible for creating guidelines within the classroom. They must be reasonable, age appropriate, and meaningful to the children. Consistency is imperative with the guidelines, as is the enforcement of them. High expectations should be a part of these guidelines as well. Behavioral guidelines are conveyed through grace and courtesy lessons, modeled by the

teacher in the room. Modeling the expected behavior is important, so that the children can actually see the desired behavior, and then engage in the action themselves. The adult, being the dynamic link between the children and the materials, is responsible for this outer discipline. It should not be confused with what we traditionally think of as discipline, which would be scolding or punitive in nature. Dr. Montessori states that:

> It is useless to depend upon scoldings and entreaties for the maintenance of discipline. These may at first give the illusion of being somewhat effective; but very soon, when real discipline makes its appearance, all this collapses as a wretched illusion in the face of reality: 'The night gives way to the day'. The first glimmerings of discipline have their origin in work. At a certain moment a child becomes intensely interested in some task. This is shown by the expression on his face, his intense concentration, and his constancy in carrying out the same exercise (1972, p. 304).

So, outer discipline leads to inner discipline. The outer discipline provides the proper environment and boundaries for the child, and now the child is able to "work". This is the foundation of the inner discipline being developed by the child, based in concentration, stemming from the repetition of work that is interesting to the child. Dr. Montessori phrases it thusly:

> When a child has reached the stage when he repeats and exercise, he begins to grow interiorly as may be seen from exterior discipline. But this phenomenon does not always occur. The same exercises are not repeated at every age. In fact, repetition should correspond to a need. The essence of experimental method of education consists in providing exercises that will satisfy the needs of a growing organism (1972, p. 310).

The needs of the growing organism are met through repetition that meets the developmental needs of the child. These needs that direct the building of inner discipline follow certain natural laws of development. Natural laws guide the child to eat, sleep, move, explore, touch, taste, speak, interact with others, and absorb the world that he is

immersed into. These laws direct the child in his attainment of inner discipline, and are vital building blocks in his quest of self-construction.

Now that discipline has been discussed, it must be meshed with freedom. What is freedom? "Freedom is the possibility to make full use of condition to develop ourselves and make our own contributions" (Grant-Miller, 2007). Freedom is a conquest. The freedom to move at will, to make independent choices, and the freedom to communicate as desired are all based in the social context of society. Freedom must be balanced, however, by certain limitations. Freedom without limits or guidelines can lead to neglect, fear, uncertainty, and anti-social behavior and attitudes. Within the structure of a family, there is room for personal freedom. There are, of course, guidelines and boundaries which must be maintained. The expectations for mutual respect, appropriate behavior, and attitudes relative to life are all important. These guidelines must be set for each child upon birth, as they have already begun to build their personalities.

There are guidelines that must be set within the prepared environment of the Montessori classroom as well. The children are given the freedom to choose their own work, to move freely within the educational space, and are allowed to repeat their chosen activities until they are satisfied. Upon these freedoms, certain limits will be expected and carried out by the adult in the environment. Before a child may choose a new material, they must receive a presentation of that material to ensure it's proper usage. This is where the knowledge of the material is attained by the child. A child may only take material that is on a shelf, and not in use by another child. Another expectation is that the use of the material must be alignment with it's purpose. The brown prisms are

certainly not for throwing! The children are also free to communicate with one another in the classroom. They may not, however, interrupt other children that are busy at work, and deep in concentration. The freedom of movement is also met with the guideline that the movement should be purposeful. Moving to an appropriate work space, finding a new material, seeking help, or going to the bathroom are all example of purposeful movement. Wandering around, interrupting children while at work is simply not an option. Freedom of choice is the umbrella that provides shelter for all of the other freedoms and discipline that takes place within the prepared environment, which I believe is why Dr. Montessori states that "free choice is the highest of all the mental processes. Only the child deeply aware of his need for practice and for the development of his spiritual life, can really be said to choose freely" (1995, p. 271). Freedom of choice is the keystone to the philosophy, and the success of the children that operate within it.

The Montessori adult is responsible to oversee all of these tasks. As stated earlier, the adult must create the balance between freedom and discipline within the classroom environment. This is done by setting and enforcing guidelines consistently, maintaining a properly prepared environment, and modeling appropriate actions. The adult should speak with a soft yet firm voice. The adult should maintain a purposeful, calm demeanor that models exactly that which the children are expected to follow-a proper indirect presentation. The adult must maintain the integrity of the environment by maintaining the materials, and the order within the environment. The adult must also know where the child is developmentally, or his zone of proximal development. This is done through proper presentations, observations, record keeping, and learning when to intervene and

when to stay away and simply observe-learn the difference between random acts and spontaneous learning. Dr. Montessori makes this point very well here:

> Before such attention and concentration have been attained, the teacher must learn to control herself so that the child's spirit shall be free to expand and show its powers; the essence of her duty is not to interrupt the child in his efforts. This is a moment in which the delicacy of the teacher's moral sensitiveness, acquired during her training, comes into play. She must lean that it is not so easy to help, nor even, perhaps, to stand still and watch. Even when helping and serving the children, she must not cease to observe them, because the birth of concentration in a child is as delicate a phenomenon as the bursting of a bud into bloom. But she will not be watching with the aim of make in her presence felt, or of helping the weaker ones by her own strength. She observes in order to recognize the child who has attained the power to concentrate and to admire the glorious rebirth of his spirit (1995, p. 272).

In conclusion, the child only develops through his work, which is enabled by the freedoms given to him and contained by the guidelines that lead to inner discipline. The children's interest must be sparked, then met with precise, orderly, presentations within the prepared environment. Through the pursuit of perfection, the child will build his will. The adult must be prepared to meet the needs of the children, which includes standing back and not interfering. The adult should remember the "words of John the Baptist after the Messiah had been revealed to him: "He must grow while I diminish'" (1995, p. 274). The child must grow, and the guide must diminish. This will be indirectly proportional to the development of the child's inner discipline-as the child grows, the adult will be needed less-independence is near.

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