

Higher Ground's Approach to Identity

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A person's *identity*, in the sense meant here, is a combination of his or her values and self-concept. It is a general term in development and psychology, one that goes back to at least Erikson, whose usages have trickled into the common language as part of our understanding of adolescence (e.g. "identity crisis").

It's also a term that has increasingly been used to understand a variety of individual differences with moral and social significance, such as race, sex, gender, and culture. This is thrown into sharp relief by identity politics, but the better parts of identity politics are best seen as part of a trend to elevate consciousness around a more representative sample of the distribution of human experiences. Identity is thus an increasingly loaded word, but its dual meanings also make it useful. The goal here is to provide a view of identity development in the general sense will ground a view as to how we might approach identity in the more specific, modern sense. The hope is that it's a useful lens to apply when triangulating positions on some of these issues.

Higher Ground's approach to identity, as is its approach to all things, is *agency-centric*. Supporting the development of identity means supporting a person in becoming increasingly capable of independently defining his or her identity. This is not a fleeting capacity, such as a simple, willed choice, or the mere endorsement of an affective stance, or the passive acceptance of one's demographics, native culture, or ancestral history. Agency requires the competent deployment of higher human powers—knowledge and self-knowledge, integrity and empathy—that themselves merit developmental support.

This agency-centric approach, even as stated simply, has radical implications. It follows from our commitments as Montessorians:

- that development is fundamentally a process of self-creation,
- that the purpose of education is to systematically support this process,
- and that a fully lived life is characterized by a high degree of fundamental independence,
- for which independent cognition is the keystone.

Whether a student is grappling with the laws of motion or her own sexuality—whether she's parsing the history and culture of ancient Egypt, or grappling with her own family history and culture—our aim is to foster independent thought and understanding.

Montessori herself did not write in terms of "identity". But she did think that young children formed deep and enduring values that were extremely resistant to conscious change later in life, both through their culture and through their own interactions with the world. For older students, she thought it important that they be given adequate learning material to be able to independently identify as a member of a wonderful, ongoing, global human civilization. For adolescents she thought that it was natural that adolescents explore roles in the economy, and

important that they valorized economic work—which is (partly) to say, took it seriously as part of their identity.

Montessori did not write much of anything about race, gender, or sex¹—though for the latter two (which she did not distinguish) we know that she held very liberal views.² She herself was a devout Catholic who was perfectly fine with religion being a classroom element. But she was also fine with its absence, as evidenced by her cross-cultural work. Her writing on religious education generally falls inside the range between non-sectarian and humanistic; when she speaks about sectarian idiosyncrasies as developmentally important, it's subsumed under culture (see e.g. *TAM* 17). (In any case, *Higher Ground* has a fully secular implementation of core Montessori principles.) When she wrote explicitly of solving for prejudice in relationship to development, it was almost exclusively in terms of *class* (see e.g. 1946 32).

If we want to understand modern issues of identity, particularly those connected with potential prejudice, by using the Montessorian school of thought, it will thus not be by direct historical reference. We'll need to apply what she says about these other topics, along with her more fundamental principles. This paper will do that, though the primary aim of the paper is not historical. It is to take a stand based on what we think is true—against the background understanding that we think that Montessori got the essence of development and education right, and that exploring her thought is very fruitful.

This paper seeks will briefly touch on three areas of identity formation:

1. A person's basic sense of confidence and worth, and basic capacity to love and value, formed primarily in early childhood
2. A person's relationship to humanity at large, formed in the elementary years and beyond
3. A person's conscious identity, in the roughly folk/Eriksonian sense, formed in adolescence and beyond

These categories are cast in a way that abstracts across differences in identity. This is a feature, a part of our humanistic approach. But in each of them, these differences are pertinent, as

¹ One of her more obscure works, *Pedagogical Anthropology* (1913), does contain some discussion of racial and sexual differences. It's predominantly physical though it does include some racialized discussion of aesthetic and intellectual traits. It's similar to (and in many ways tamer than) similar works by many 19th/early 20th c. authors, and she disclaims her expertise and its importance in the introduction, noting that it is essentially her lecture notes from her teaching days that have been published at the behest of her students. Given how medical and physical it is, and how little it comes up in the rest of her work, it's hard to know what to make of it.

² Though it is not part of her main corpus, from reports and epistolary we can infer that she thought that boys and girls should be integrated in education and that their work should be the same—that the work of girls should include academics and that of boys should include the “practical life” of cleaning and food preparation—a controversial view at the time. See e.g. Radice (1919). Montessori was known in her early life as a feminist advocate. She did not change these views with age as far as we know, but as she changed her focus to educational advocacy, so she deliberately said less about other topics. See *CSW* for Montessori's own allusions to this, and Kramer's (1976) biography for a study of her intellectual development.

access points and sources of inspiration, and as targets of potential prejudice and developmental harm. It's from a humanistic frame that we tackle questions of how we support a student in developing a self-conception that is properly celebratory and integrated when it comes to things like sex and race.

1. Love as the Foundation

Montessori's unique view of development is that the foundations of a healthy psychology are based on a specific capacity to productively interact with the external world. She most commonly terms this capacity "work", a deliberate decision to capitalize on and elevate a fairly ordinary term.

Work refers to a capacity for expend effort—sustained cognitive and physical effort—in intentionally³ interacting with the world. *"The role of education is to interest the child profoundly in an external activity to which he will give all his potential"* (FCTA 4, emphasis in original).

This work serves as a number of developmental functions, such as unifying the child's various faculties and bringing them under centralized, intelligent control. What is most pertinent for our purposes is that this work is a profound experience of *valuing*. It is motivated by an internal interest, follows a path towards a goal, and requires sustained activity to accomplish, and results in some material change of the world (1946 21).

Characterologically, for Montessori, this results in the development of persistence and love of effort (SAE 7). Affectively, this process is accompanied by great joy and growing confidence (*Psychogeometry* 1). Love of self and love of the world form an irreducible dyad: love of self flows from a sense of confident competence, which is driven by a delight in building things, learning things, meeting one's needs, and so on.

This love is the essential fire in man, without which he cannot live. It is not simply tender affection. I assure you that I have seen this love; I have been amazed by it; I have called it 'love for one's environment'. ...

Love of one's environment is the secret of all man's progress and the secret of social evolution. It becomes manifest in people who have survived life's vicissitudes, who have been able to keep their integrity, or who have rediscovered such integrity within themselves. Love of the environment inspires man to learn, to study, to work. ...

³ Intentionality has to be qualified and specified for extremely young children; in this context, Montessori's "work" is best understood as the process by which intentionality is gradually practiced in attenuated form and built out of its fledgling component parts.

Love spurs man to learn. It leads to intimate contact between the thing that is loved and the human spirit, which in turn leads to production. Labor, life, and normal human development result. (*E&P* iii.12)

It's critically important for Montessori—and for Higher Ground—that these fundamentals of one's mind are built on an individual's direct relationship with the world. That is, at the deepest level, identity—one's basic capacity for valuing and one's basic positive self-conception—is not fundamentally social. It is the "non-social security" on which subsequent healthy social relationships can be founded.

However, the support system that a child has in helping her continuously practice work in the sense just described *is* social, in many ways. Most importantly, it depends on adults who believe in the child's capacity for increasingly independent and challenging work—who believe that this capacity exists and that its exercise is good and worthy of support—and who will reflect back to the child, in an accessible way, the positive meaning and experience of this work.

Montessori was eminently concerned with obliterating prejudices that blocked these beliefs, and indeed used the language of fighting prejudice (e.g. *SAE* 2). The most general such prejudice, a constant target of her criticism, is that children are feckless creatures, defective humans who are to be dealt with by herding until they can better approximate adulthood. Children raised by such adults typically don't form a positive relationship with themselves or the world, and indeed are at risk of entering a lifelong state of subconscious war against the adult world (*1946* 1, 31, 32; *E&P* i.3, ii.4).

This concern extended to making judgments about particular children as e.g. naughty or disobedient, judgments she always saw as wrongly negatively moralizing children. Her view was that children should be seen as fundamentally morally good, with negative behaviors and tendencies being closer to pathologies than wickedness. Famously, her initial developmental work was with children who were destitute and/or considered insane. She quickly came to see the main obstacle to the development of these children as entirely resulting from a lack of opportunity caused by adult prejudices (*MM* 3, *DC* 2).

When applying this perspective to modern sensibilities and concerns, the most important generalization is the most obvious: there is a need for educators and caretakers to actively uproot prejudices regarding children. The distribution of prejudices—and our awareness of them—will naturally change over time. Prejudices concerning culture (e.g. of recently immigrated or religiously heterodox children) as well as race and sex (e.g. stereotypes concerning demure Asian personalities, the cattiness of girls, the aggressiveness of black boys, etc.)—these will impact one's treatment of a child, which in turn will likely impact the child's ability to act in the world in developmentally healthy ways, and her perspective on herself when she does so act.

A confidence that one can work to affect a benevolent world is a precursor to a healthy identity: it is the basis for all goals and values, and it is the core of a positive self-conception.

We actively support the formation of this perspective very early in development at Higher Ground, mainly by helping each child draw confidence and joy from work. And we actively dismantle prejudices that block this process, including stereotypes rooted in ethnicity and gender. The mechanisms exist at the level of theory (as discussed here), teacher training (which includes initial steps of self-knowledge and self-work), and classroom practice (which includes observation practices designed to bypass and ultimately uproot prejudice).

In sum: the child's fundamental capacity for love and implicit self-love is a key outcome of Montessori education. These outcomes are targeted partially because they are universal human needs that serves as the fundamental ground for idiosyncrasies of identity. Prejudicial views of children—of children in general or particular sub-demographics of children—hinder development and block the effective deployment of the Montessori method, and are perforce important to actively understand and combat.

2. Belonging to Humanity

The relationship of self to world might be fundamental, but most issues of identity come to the fore when considering one's relationship to others.

Our approach to identity at this level is aimed at helping children *positively identity as human beings in general*. As we'll see, there is a need to consider human diversity as well in order to accomplish this at the right level of generality. But the approach is unapologetically humanistic and universalistic: our common humanity transcends differences.

Delivering on this outcome is not trivial. History, up through the present, is replete with views that afford some humans more humanity than others on the basis of sex, race, culture, birth, etc. The mainstreaming of the Enlightenment perspective that humanity is evenly and universally distributed is extremely recent, and is indeed still ongoing (and contested). Children are exquisitely sensitive to implicit messaging as well as explicit instruction. And, even at the level of explicit instruction, there are pedagogical questions as to how to personally relate any particular student to an Enlightenment framework.

Montessori's approach, in essence, is that children, starting in elementary school, should be presented with a positive, relatable picture of the history of human civilization. The student should be made to fall in love with humanity, not by exhortation or propagandizing, but by a factual presentation of the history of human accomplishment (*CSW 4.3, SRL 2, TEHP 3*). There are premonitions of the modern progress movement (e.g. Pinker 2018) in Montessori's view of history education: the material progress human beings have made is extremely significant and should be a centerpiece of education. A representative passage:

To the Indian teachers who studied the Montessori method and applied it in their schools, I recommended that they link the subjects they taught (in the fields of geography, chemistry, physics) to the history of the various discoveries and particularly the story of the lives of men who had contributed to this conquest of progress. As a

result, in these schools a prodigious awakening of sensibility and interest came about on the part of the children who never tired of asking details about the lives of these marvelous beings. They were particularly interested in the difficulties these men had to overcome, the prejudices they had to fight, the privations they had to suffer in order to discover the secrets of the unknown world and of the mysterious forces of nature.

The children frequently asked to see portraits of these heroes and delighted in relentlessly pursuing the near-miraculous significance of their work once they had a clear idea of the times in which they had lived, the degree of ignorance of their contemporaries with regard to their research and studies, and the dearth of means at their disposal.

A near-religious respect grew within them for these men who lived in such distant times and places, who belonged to such a diversity of social classes; in this way, they managed to thoroughly grasp, almost concretely, the universal unity for good achieved by the work of men the world over. (SRL 2)

Montessori says next to nothing about literature.⁴ At Higher Ground, we take the approach that literature is a learning material for human nature—serving the same function for knowledge of human beings as does the geometry cabinet or bead frame for learning about math. Here, too, similar considerations apply: we want to present a rich, relatable picture of what it means to be human, not just through factual history but via aesthetic tools of characterization of drama.

A number of questions need to be asked of this approach, and their full treatment is beyond the scope of this essay. The two most pertinent ones are:

- How does one ensure that students fully relate to this picture, such that they value and *identify with* humanity, and that they do so at the right level of generality?
- How does one address the injustices and horrors replete in history, particularly those with lingering effects that might need to be experienced and grappled with by students as part of their identity formation?

With respect to the first question, of relatability, our approach at Higher Ground is to be cognizant of the full range of human greatness, in the history human progress and as characterized in art. We're committed to diversity specifically in the positive, curricular presentation of humanity.

While it is not *necessarily* the case that students are more likely to identify with someone by being similar to them in specific respects such as ethnicity—as opposed to in more abstract

⁴ It's unclear whether this was because she thought that literature wasn't particularly important for early and elementary education (her views on adolescent curriculum were very nascent, so if she thought it important there we wouldn't necessarily know it). Or whether she was just, to some extent, taking a certain literary education for granted as part of the background context of what a teacher would naturally do.

ways, like being admirable—a skew towards a subset of humanity that is systematic enough is likely to negatively affect many students outside of that subset. Equally importantly, it does no favors for the students *inside* the subset either, who now have a narrower range of exemplars to draw from, and who now lack knowledge of entire epochs of creative human accomplishment—who know something about the Renaissance, but nothing about the Timurid Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance.⁵

It's worth noting that the aim here is *not* the multiculturalist one, which tends to fragment and relativize a student's perspective on humanity. It is rather one of properly identifying and unifying all the threads of human progress under a broadly Enlightenment heading.

With respect to the darker sides of humanity, Montessori drops provocative hints as to how it should be approached. She wrote in the late 40s, after the WWII, that humanity

has always struggled on, despite being weighed down by so many moral defects. Help them [students] to face up to and understand these moral defects that have crept into all the wonderful things that he [man/mankind] has created. They do aspire for something fine, they have a faith in life; but each year that they live in the world they see these institutions of man to be so full of corruption that they attempt to disregard or destroy them. Instead we should help them to see how wonderful is the essence of truth that lies behind them, help them to understand exactly where the moral corruption lies, and then they can do their best to be free of it. (CSW p. 104)

There are seeming resonances in this passage with the school of Civil Rights thought that grapples with identifying, admiring, and extending the accomplishments of the American system of rights, rather than writing it off as fundamentally corrupt (e.g. Baldwin 1962, 1963)—if not in exact ideology, than in general moral-methodological approach. Montessori is intensely concerned with injustice, but in certain ways she is even more worried about cynicism and ingratitude that leads to an enduring alienation from the work of bettering humanity.

How does this add up to a coherent approach that is relevant to questions of how a student identifies with humanity?

In general:

- As a default, we teach more injustices and horrors and more explicitly as students get older. This stands in contrast to the increasingly common approach: to make the injustices of history a *primary* focus starting early on in elementary school (or preschool). (Later in adolescence, we introduce arguments that our approach is wrong and let the students grapple with that.)

⁵ The point here is not the multiculturalist one, which tends to fragment and relativize a student's perspective on humanity; it is rather one of properly identifying and unifying all the threads of human progress.

- We frame them as part of the still-ongoing history of human liberation. This is surprisingly easy, since those who actually fight and rectify the injustices typically think of *themselves* in this way. (Again, when they don't, this is part of what our students grapple with, especially in adolescence.)
- We take the above approach as a curricular default, and then adjust for student-driven questions that arise as a result of their own interests and experiences. Questions of, say, the need for police reform would not come up in our curriculum the 2nd grade. By default they would be addressed in various places in American history (e.g. the period between Reconstruction and Jim Crow) and literature (e.g. *Les Misérables*) later in study, at which points students would naturally consider their application. But if they came up as a result of a young student's experience, we would support her in grappling with and understanding that.

In summary: a major, ongoing goal of the knowledge curriculum is to present an exciting picture of humanity that is grist for the mill for students' constructions of their respective identities. The primary focus is on giving the students the right raw material for this work, and the hope is that they admire and see themselves as partaking in the best aspects of human nature.

3. Conscious Identity

Issues of identity are most consistently considered to be part of adolescent development, and for good reason: this is the age at which a person starts to consciously form a wider worldview and framework of values, at an adult level, in a way that generalizes across one's lifespan and across a variety of personal, moral, and social issues (*FCTA C*). In a culture dominated by concern about fairly specific forms of identity, this thinking almost invariably intersects with those concerns—even if it is only to reject them as important.

We ourselves are not and cannot be neutral on these questions. As is probably broadly clear from the above, we take a humanistic, optimistic, individualistic perspective in our view of students and consequently in our educational approach. There are even particular virtues that we extol. The “valorization of work”, mentioned above for early childhood, extends to adolescence and forms a core part of our programming.⁶

However, it is also part of our view—of our individualism and optimism about each human mind—that students must come be able to independently think through these issues, and that our primary job is to help them acquire that capacity.

⁶ “The essential reform is this: to put the adolescent on the road to achieving economic independence. ... This ‘independence’ has more educational than practical value; that is to say, it has a closer connection to the psychology of the adolescent than with an eventual actual utility. So, even if a boy were so rich that his economic security seemed above all the vicissitudes of life he would still derive great personal benefit from being initiated in economic independence. For this would result in a ‘valorization’ of his personality, in making him feel capable of succeeding in life by his own efforts and on his own merits, and at the same time would put him in direct contact with the supreme reality of social life.” (*FCTA A*, p. 64)

Our expectation is that we will have students who are extremely proud of, attached to, and even defensive of their heritage as presented to them by their parents and grandparents—and that we will have students who reject their family history as irrelevant to their identities. We'll have students whose experience is colored strongly by their race or sex, and students who resent the assumption that their experience is so colored. We'll have students who are naturally activists and students who are overtly apolitical. We'll have students that overlap on particular issues identity but for divergent ideological reasons—and vice versa. Our students will explore and adopt views on virtually every topic and across every dimension of possibility space.

How is it possible to support such a panoply of developing identities without taking sides, programmatically?

Part of the answer lies in extending the first point above to adolescence: having a culture of work, in which students can find meaning by effortful productivity, is something that can be nurtured generally without being partisan about *types* of work. And finding meaning in purposeful activity is a core part of adolescent identity exploration (and social development). “There is a need to realize the value of work in all its forms, whether manual or intellectual, to be called ‘mate’, to have a sympathetic understanding of all forms of activity” (*FCTA A*).

The second way is with an adolescent version of a liberal arts approach to education. It's to embrace the diversity and controversy, while giving students the intellectual tools to think their way through it. Building on and nuancing their prior study of history, students expand into a fuller study of philosophy and the social sciences. The premise here is that there is the value-add of a liberal arts education done well—the capacity to draw on other great scholars to learn how to think more clearly and rigorously about the human condition—can be brought in much earlier: in middle and high school rather than college.

This includes explicit instruction on controversial topics related to contemporary concerns about identity, particularly race and sex. Both have trimester-length philosophical treatments in our humanities material, and students learn how to competently think their way through these issues. The goal, as always, is independent understanding—in this case, an understanding of the shape of the controversies. Understanding, even at the meta-level, is conducive to love of self and others, as well as to considered judgment and conscious identity-formation.

The goal is not to tell students where to land, but to improve the process by which students choose and make their landings.

Conclusion: Optimism

Montessori is profoundly optimistic about the human potential within each child. She writes that

Education depends on a belief in the power of the child and on a certainty that the child

has within himself the capacity to develop into a being that is far superior to us. He will not only be capable of a better way of living but will be the only person who can show us this. (CSW 6.3)

For this reason, her tendency is always to focus on the fundamentals—the child’s basic capacity for independent thought and action, the child’s basic orientation towards self, society, and world—and then trust the child to take the resulting agency and work the rest out herself over time.

This is as true with respect to issues of identity as it is for anything in education.

At Higher Ground, we’ve attempted to adopt and apply this spirit to the challenges of our time. We constantly ask ourselves: what circumstances and perspectives thereon that our students will need to competently grapple with over the course of their lives? And they will unquestionably need to consider questions of identity, both personally and in wider society. So the question becomes how to foster this competency.

Our approach is to take the basic ingredients that Montessori identified as important for human life—an earned security, a genuine love of self and others, and an implicit, bottom-up optimism—and intermix them with materials that will serve as enduring middle terms to pertinent issues of identity today. And then, like Montessori, we step back and trust the child.