

## Freedom and Discipline in Education- Part I

By Margaret Lowenfeld

Education is in these days very much concerned with the concepts of freedom and discipline and the controversies concerning them. These notes arise not out of the experience of teaching children but out of conclusions suggested by the careful study of children who have failed to be educable. With these children in mind, I wish to suggest that before we can usefully discuss freedom or discipline in education, we should attempt to arrive at some agreement as to the fundamental concepts underlying these terms.

What is Freedom?

Freedom may perhaps be defined as a set of circumstances in which an individual is at liberty to carry out what he wishes to do. It implies that the surrounding world and the self approve that which the 'I' desires to accomplish, also that the 'I' itself desires to be and is neither let nor hindered within itself. In a state of freedom the 'I' concerned, whether child or adult, would feel that what he wished to do was good, that he was able to carry it out, and that in doing so he would meet with at least the tacit approval of his environment.

Freedom, therefore, taken in this sense, is the possibility of carrying out anything you wish to do with the approval of your environment. Recently this has been held up as at goal in itself for the education of children.

In the older view of education, the child's mind was looked upon more or less as a blank page whereon could be written by force of repetition and example those facts held to be desirable by the educators. Very little attention was, or is now, paid by those holding modifications of this view to the question of the motives, which should actuate a child in being responsive to this attempt, or to the relation between this process and the child's own fundamental character. Instead, the results of failure to comply with the plan were so much more unpleasant than the effort of compliance that the majority of children would decide to fall in with the plan and to do their best to be instructed by it.

Now whatever the merits or demerits of this system, into which I do not for the moment wish to enter, it is at any rate clear that there is here no connection with the concept of freedom. For good or for ill, such a form of education is *predetermined* by the educators, and into it the child must fit as best it may. The question as to what the child himself wishes to do is not raised at all in a system of this kind. Instead it is argued that since a child has no knowledge it cannot tell whether it wishes to know certain facts or not until it has made the experiment. The evident enjoyment of many children when taught in this way seems to show the soundness of the reasoning adopted.

The same applies to earlier nursery education. It seems so clear that a child is happier and more comfortable if it has become able to control itself and its own wishes in conformity with the wishes of other people, and has acquired those manners, which make daily life among adults and children so much easier.

On the face of it, both contentions seem reasonable. It is only later experience of these children that makes me pause to reconsider the nature of the growth of a young child. Has a child, apart from the desire to play, any real desires at all, and if it were given full freedom to carry these out, what would be likely to happen? Would knowledge result, and if so, what kind of knowledge?

No knowledge, which is real, can be acquired by any human being unless he is driven by a desire to possess it. Apart from mere retention in the brain of minute particles of fact, knowledge, if it is to educate the mind at all, must marry intimately with the whole substance of the mind. For this to be possible, the mind itself must meet such knowledge with an inherent desire for its incorporation.

The idea of freedom in education is based upon the conception that children have strong desires of their own, desires which can be side-tracked but not annihilated, and which, if given freedom, will lead them to the goal we desire for them.

Every infant is born into the world with equipment for the gaining of sensory experience, and with certain dominant desires. He desires to understand his environment, to have power over it and over his body, and to gain pleasurable experience. In health, these desires are strong and give him little rest. He has also a great delight in activity, in noise and shouting and in the funny side of life. By nature it has no respect whatever for other people's property (though much for his own) or for the persons or rights of other human beings. On the other hand a healthy child has a large fund of generosity and good humour, and a willingness to forget and start again. Power of concentration is a marked characteristic of healthy childhood, and the ability to repeat again and again an effort, which has met with failure. If a child desires to know, and is left undiscouraged with enough material to work upon, he will go on undaunted working at a problem until he finds out what he wants to know.

Every child wants to know about himself- what he is and where he came from, about the world in which he finds himself—what is clay and what is water, where wood comes from and how it differs from iron, how trains go and what sort of person is an engine driver, what would happen if he killed the cat and if mice come alive again. He wishes to be strong and run and climb like Tom, to drive a car and take photos like Daddy, to cook and sew like Mummy. But he lacks equipment for his experiments (and this equipment is the same as that needed by the adult worker in any sphere into which the element of learning enters— that is to say, tools and the material on which to

employ them), direction and constructive criticism. The newer educator believes that a healthy child when supplied with equipment sets out to discover for himself exactly those things which we want him to learn.

What then is the advantage of such a system? It is vastly more difficult to put into operation than the earlier system, and if the results are the same, why go through all that turmoil and discomfort?

The answer is that a child who has taught himself has in so doing become a free man. He has, from desire and not from compulsion, struggled with and mastered his interior difficulties—his laziness, untidiness and misty-mindedness—and in the accomplishment of his own ends he has furthermore gained personal independence. Such a child may know less of actual facts than the child educated by the earlier method, but for him the gates of further knowledge stand permanently ajar: he has learned how to put his weight upon them, and where and how the force can be applied that will wrench them open.