La Istituzione degli Erdkinder[1]
Maria Montessori

Montessori wrote of the adolescent and her vision for the third plane of development in the Appendices to From Childhood to Adolescence. *Practitioners who have taken up this work have carefully weighed every word and every word combination, and the adolescent programmes that have emerged from their exhaustive studies have changed the face of Montessori and contributed a dynamic alternative to mainstream adolescent education.*

The following article, edited by Greg J. MacDonald, provides an opportunity for practitioners to compare and contrast the information provided in the Appendices with this new overview of a Montessori approach to the adolescent. The article presents a consolidation of thought—and indeed the use of the term Erdkinder—that does not appear in previous articles, leading one to speculate that it is vintage 1934–36, clearly either previewing or summarizing the Erdkinder papers as it offers the categories of physical care, culture, syllabus, moral orientation, and social orientation. Most interesting is the characterization of culture, defined as providing an explanation as to how one's society functions, 'the correlation between groups of people through their work; the balance and abundance which occur through exchange; the different functions of each kind of work for the maintenance and progress of human civilization, and the contribution of every individual. Not in an abstract way, but in a highly practical way.' The emphasis for subjects of study is based on choice; that is, the student chooses what he wants to study, moving in the direction of his life orientation. A resident psychologist can offer career advice based not on abstract tests but on observation of the student at work, in social conditions on the farm or occupations elsewhere which are akin to those of society itself.

This syllabus presents a smattering of subjects, once again revealing Dr Montessori's sense of a discipline-based organization of knowledge and her advanced sense of what is universal and interesting to adolescents about the subject matter. That discipline, or the rules of the institution, should be included in the syllabus suggests that regulations are a basis for character development. Lastly, a curious twist on Montessori's usual adolescent social orientation is this piece's focus on 'love' of the greatness of human life and the adolescent's search for a great human endeavour or aim in life, referred to in contemporary Montessori adolescent circles as the 'great work'.[2]

THE INSTITUTION OF THE ERDKINDER

The critical and very delicate period of puberty requires the creation of an institution that has the capacity to take into consideration and meet the special needs of this stage of life.

PHYSICAL CARE

During the transition from childhood to maturity, the human organism becomes fragile and delicate, so much so that doctors consider this time comparable to that of birth. Statistics show that the rate of illness and death is very high in these two phases of life compared to any other period. Hence the necessity to take the physical needs into consideration and to give every individual the care that he needs within the framework of general health care.[3]

During puberty the body tires easily. Whereas the heart and lungs keep the same volume, the legs grow so much that the two organs almost seem inadequate for the work they have to perform. The effort they make is

at the cost of other energies, especially mental and intellectual, which in this period lie dormant. This is the reason why people of this age are always a little tired and do not feel like studying; it is also why the rate of illness and mortality is so much higher.

The institution we envisage should meet the needs of this age group and provide a rural environment where the adolescent can live as much as possible in fresh air for a period of at least two years, under the observation of a doctor specialized in endocrinology and abnormal development. He will follow the growth and development of every individual by examining each periodically and by regularly taking their measurements so that he can follow accurately every change that occurs.[4]

Special attention should be given to the choice of food which in this phase must be absolutely non-toxic and rich in vitamins. All stimulants (such as coffee, tea, etc.) should be eliminated as well as other poisons such as alcohol, tobacco, etc. The body should have regular but modest exercise, by performing activities and work as much as possible in the open air. Considering the swift development of the legs, the activities will be such that they require the use of the legs without putting too much strain on the heart. In this way, not only a healthy development is obtained but also beauty, which lays its definite foundation in this particular period of life.

CULTURE

Although these two years[5] are spent in the country and are intended to give intelligence a two-year rest, naturally intellectual activities will be included. This rest should not be understood as a suspension of that faculty but as a moderate exercise. Culture will be given in a highly practical and active way by means of experiments and artistic expression. This is especially aimed at meeting another category of needs of the child of this age: the psychological needs.

Until adolescence the child was drawn by nature to the acquirement of his own individuality, but he now enters a psychological period directed towards society. Culture must, therefore, give him the means which allow him a *social orientation*, by making him understand how the world he lives in functions; the correlation between groups of people through their work; the balance and abundance which occur through exchange; the different functions of each kind of work for the maintenance and progress of human civilization, and the contribution of every individual. Not in an abstract way, but in a highly practical way.[6] From the abundance of ways to study which he has at his disposal he can choose a category. Not all the subjects we enumerate here are compulsory, but just a few which the child can choose. Not only the category but every single subject. This choice and the relevant experience he will acquire will serve him, especially after a careful series of psychological tests, as a criterion for his *professional orientation*, to tentatively identify a possible position which every individual following his own inclination can occupy in this big organization consisting of the enormous quantity of work and human activity.[7] But how can you orient yourself without gradual experiments? And how can you give a psychological opinion based only on tests and pretend to be able to indicate the future of a man on the basis of the responses and reactions obtained in artificial circumstances? Only by examining an individual while he is working, can a psychologist judge and help. And the psychologist should be the great help and guide of the Erdkinder in their understanding of the development of their own spiritual life.

As we have said, the subjects should be practical and based on science.

Agriculture and gardening: Scientific knowledge and practical application of production and sale. Beekeeping.

Chemistry: applied to agriculture and all of practical life.

Physics: General knowledge. The laws of statics and their practical application to the construction of houses and bridges. Laws of dynamics and mechanics, and their practical application to the construction and functioning of machines.

Mathematical materializations: Mathematics studied and analysed by means of materials which illustrate the principles and offer a visible materialization.[8]

Literature: Perfection of written and spoken language. Study of literature including collective reading and drama. Learning a foreign language in practice by living with foreign people.

History: Study of Sacred History (starting with Exodus)[9] in relation to general history up to the conquests of Alexander the Great. Main aspects of the culture of Palestine in relation to that of Egypt. General history of the ancient peoples in relation to geographical conditions of the territory occupied by them and to the development of communications.

The constitution of one's own country compared to that of a contemporary foreign country with a contrasting constitution. Political organization of ancient Rome. Early Christian writings in relation to civilization.[10] A library of modern history and geographical discoveries will be at the disposal of the students. The books will be recommended according to the moment and their direct study in the form of free reading.

Geography: First principles of astronomy. Geography as a current episode of the history of the earth. Production and exchange. Basics of political economy.

Music: Listening to music with the aim of becoming acquainted with the various classical and modern musical compositions. Choral singing and dance.

Artistic work: Reproduction of every aspect of rural art of the past. Miniatures.

Religious education: Liturgical rites accompanied by Gregorian chant.

Scientific biology: Rudiments of embryology. Study of the reproduction of plants and artificial selection. Study of reproduction of inferior animals. Study of natural characteristics related to the protection of the species (observation, practice). Study of the breeding of animals, poultry farming (incubators). Fish farming if possible.

Commercial sciences: Secretarial studies: stenography, typing, bookkeeping and business correspondence. Practical work: technique of selling: retail (in a shop) and obtaining orders from people who are far away. Hotel management: with special attention to the preparation of the rooms and contact with the clients. Housekeeping: as related to healthy nutrition.[11]

Didactic practice: Instruction in the form of coaching of younger children.

Physical exercise: As much time as possible in the open air: activities and sport which require above all the use of the lower limbs and provide exercise without straining the lungs and the heart. Compulsory sports: biking, long walks, golf, swimming.[12] Optional sports: horseback riding and mountain climbing. Collective exercises and parades.

Discipline: Individual and collective disciplinary exercises in accordance with the guide of the Institution which offers a series of progressive rules; a strict observance of these disciplinary rules is not an obligation, but a criterion of psychological orientation of the individual character. Only certain disciplinary rules are compulsory with regard to the domestic regulations of the Institution.

MORAL ORIENTATION

Adolescence is the sensitive period for the development of social and moral orientation. Unfortunately, a false interpretation of freedom prevails nowadays in this respect. The idea was that all religious beliefs and moral principles would be respected, yet what actually happened is that religious and moral education has been abolished from the curriculum.

So in this most essential and critical period of the human soul, the period in which the conscience is developed and the need for a spiritual life is felt most intensely, society has responded with a void, meaning that it does not satisfy the intense and delicate needs distinctive for this period, but leaves the individual free to develop without a conscience, without altruism. That this stage in life is linked to the moral development of the individual in society is also demonstrated by statistics which indicate that puberty is the period in which criminality finds its origin.[13] There is no other period than adolescence in which it is necessary to give an orientation to this accumulation of new and delicate feelings which rise confusedly in the soul and have as yet no conscious object.

Moral orientation is a real necessity which is not related to the specific opinions of a family, but to the vital conditions of the adolescent. These should be met because the social conscience of man and the final development of the individual character find their origin and are determined in this period.

SOCIAL ORIENTATION

Puberty is also the period in which a person develops the capacity to live in a social group and it is decisive for the degree of perfection this capacity reaches.

At this time the human soul by nature opens itself to love. His conscience becomes sensible to the greatness of man and to civilization based on the great conquests which were made possible by "human cooperation". He feels drawn to find a great aim in life, to prove himself by assuming a responsibility and he feels united with the rest of mankind by idealistic feelings. But again, instead of helping, society has also in this respect left a "void". The sensibility of the conscience is dulled. The most delicate feelings are repressed by education. Today's educational programmes lead the individual to a form of unconsciousness of his own value and of the value of social relationships. By necessity, given the circumstances, in everybody a form of egoism is found which expresses itself in the search for a place in life in the form of immediate possession, by using the most primitive and petty feelings which substitute the noble intention of scientific conquest for fierce competition. It is

tragic that, because the needs of this age group are not understood, there is today the risk that a whole generation of young people will be unaware of the civilization to which they belong and which they are supposed to continue, and that instead they may be reduced to the miserable condition of just looking for a "small place for themselves", remaining of no consequence and oblivious to the social evolution.

The young do not need this kind of freedom, but they do need help and a guiding light for the significance of "civilization" and a practical programme which allows for the development of these delicate feelings which nature has provided so abundantly in the soul of everyone. By a divine miracle these renew themselves with the development of the adolescent by forming the fundamental legacy of sensibilities which throughout the centuries has asserted the nobility of mankind.

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NOTES

1 This document was identified when cataloguing Maria Montessori's pedagogical papers at AMI. The Italian typescript was translated by Carolina Montessori. Unfortunately, the original document is not dated, but we expect it to have been written around the mid 1930s when Montessori increasingly started to speak on this subject. Also, while in earlier years Montessori did address secondary education, she did not yet use the term Erdkinder.

2 Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower/Random House, 1999).

3 The literature of the twenty-first century focuses more upon adolescent health problems that stem from the social environment rather than the more organic problems referred to by Dr Montessori. The World Health Organization, for example, includes substance abuse, automobile accident-related injuries, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases in its list of adolescent health concerns. (http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs345/en/index.html)

4 We would likely substitute the work of an adolescent pediatrician/expert in adolescent and young adult medicine here.

5 Practitioners working in Montessori adolescent environments are finding that the third plane was divided into two sub-planes by Dr Montessori for a reason—the first two to three years are best spent on the farm ... Life on a farm does not appear to be as necessary for the second sub-plane, however.

6 There is a direct match here with the fundamental principles of Exercises of Practical Life that must be, at any level, real activities. Practical life activities must be unmistakably adult activities in the eyes of the adolescent. They are drawn to the performance of adult tasks necessary for the life of the Erdkinder environment.

7 Colleges and career centres now routinely offer an *Interest Inventory* intended to help adolescents to tentatively identify possible fields that might match their interests and gifts.

8 As a personal, anecdotal evidence here, the editor recalls only *one* experience from his total high school mathematics career. Trigonometry was introduced with a simple material called a *TrigMaster*. This card, overlaid with a gridded circle of clear plastic, allowed students to draw a thread out to numerical scales, permitting identification of *tangent*, *sine* and *cosine* values of a right-angled triangle. That memory remains because real understanding evolved from this sensorial experience. Many Montessori adolescent environments also understand the power of a sensorial experience: carefully selected materials are available for deep study of mathematical and geometric concepts. (A piece of student work recently seen at the Montessori High School at University Circle, Cleveland featured an exhaustive and sophisticated geometric and algebraic analysis of the three Pythagoras plates presented in elementary Montessori environments, for example.)

9 Adolescent communities routinely study primary texts rather than text books. As a result, the young people involved are able to develop their own understanding and interpretation, free of the filters that accompany text books.

10 A study of religious writings (rather than solely Christian writings) and the sacred histories of many cultures would be more appropriate in the twenty-first century. Examination of the history of the Middle East and the religions that have emerged from this area might also be valuable given the current political climate.

11 Adolescents attending Montessori programmes in which they operate a commercial kitchen must pass local health regulations tests and their facility is subject to random health inspections. This is another example of the Exercises of Practical Life in action at the third plane.

12 It is interesting that Montessori specified these sports as compulsory. Her use of this word is worthy of careful consideration. She would also clearly fit in well with educators who stress the critical importance of physical activity for all children and adolescents. John T. Ratey and Eric Hagerman's groundbreaking book *Spark—The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* underscores the fact that, here again, Montessori's attention was properly placed.

13 Juvenile crime does spike at the adolescent level. Developmental patterns of the adolescent, as well as adolescent mobility and resources no doubt all contribute to this phenomenon. The roots of juvenile crime, however, are probably to be found earlier in the individual's development. Conduct Disorder (CD) which affects approximately 4% of western children and youths aged 2-18 emerges early in life. It is characterized by aggression to people or animals, deceitfulness, theft, destruction of property or serious rule violations. Most prevention programmes focus on young children. (*Preventing and Treating Conduct Disorder in Children and Youth*—A Research Report Prepared for the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development April 2004 by Charlotte Waddell, William Wong, Josephine Hua and Rebecca Godderis) Such behaviours, if not treated, readily transform into criminal behaviour as the individual becomes an adolescent.