

**Seminar: Excerpts “From Childhood to Adolescence”
by Maria Montessori
(Originally Published in 1949)**

Appendix A: “Erdkinder” (Land-children)

The need that is so keenly felt for a reform of secondary schools concerns not only an educational, but also a human and social problem. This can be summed up in one sentence: Schools as they are today, are adapted neither to the needs of adolescence nor to the times in which we live. Society has not only developed into a state of utmost complication and extreme contrasts, but it has now come to a crisis in which the peace of the world and civilization itself are threatened. The crisis is certainly connected with the immense progress that has been made in science and its practical applications, but it has not been caused by them. More than anything else it is due to the fact that the development of man himself has not kept pace with that of his external environment.

While material progress has been extremely rapid and social life has been completely transformed, the schools have remained in a kind of arrested development, organized in a way that cannot have been well suited even to the needs of the past, but that today is actually in contrast with human progress. The reform of the secondary school may not solve all the problems of our times, but it is certainly a necessary step, and a practical, though limited, contribution to an urgently needed reconstruction of society. Everything that concerns education assumes today an importance of a general kind and must represent a protection and a practical aid to the development of man; that is to say, it must aim at improving the individual in order to improve society...

It is necessary that the human personality should be prepared for the unforeseen, not only for the conditions that can be anticipated by prudence and foresight. Nor should it be strictly conditioned by one rigid specialization, but should develop at the same time the power of adapting itself quickly and easily. In this fierce battle of

civil life a man must have a strong character and quick wits as well as courage; he must be strengthened in his principles by moral training and he must also have practical ability in order to face the difficulties of life. *Adaptability* – this is the most essential quality; for the progress of the world is continually opening new careers, and at the same time closing or revolutionizing the traditional types of employment. This does not mean that in secondary schools there should be no preparation for the intellectual professions, and still less that “culture” should be neglected. On the contrary, education must be very wide and very thorough, and not only in the case of the professional intellectuals, but for all men who are living at a time that is characterized by the progress of science and its technical applications. Now, even laborers need education. They must understand the complex problems of our times, otherwise they are just a pair of hands acting without seeing what relation their work has in the pattern of society. Such as they are today, they may be said to have no head. Meanwhile, the intellectuals of today are all cripples as long as their hands remain useless. Their spirit will dry up if the grandeur of the practical reality of our days is completely shut away from them, as if it did not exist. Men with hands and no head, and men with head and no hands are equally out of place in the modern community.

The essential reform of our plan from this point of view may be defined as follows: during the difficult time of adolescence it is helpful to leave the accustomed environment of the family in the town and go to quiet surroundings in the country, close to nature. Here, an open-air life, individual care, and a non-toxic diet, must be the first consideration in organizing a “centre for study and work.”

This theory is based on a plan that has been experimentally adopted all over the world, the custom of having boarding schools (secondary schools for adolescents) situated in places far from the large cities, in the country or in small towns. These boarding schools have sprung up in England in great numbers and for all classes, even the most privileged (Eton and Harrow) and the same type is found in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Such institutions were so successful in

England and the United States that, as everyone knows, towns were built up round the universities that were previously isolated. This is the case with the majority of the modern universities in America. The proposal we have put forward has, therefore, nothing surprising about it, and there is no need of further experiment to establish the practical value of this principle. Life in the open air, in the sunshine and a diet high in nutritional content coming from the produce of neighboring fields improve the physical health, while the calm surroundings, the silence, the wonders of nature satisfy the needs of the adolescent mind for reflection and meditation. Further, in a college, the whole order of the daily life can be made to suit the demands of study and work, whereas the routine of family life has first to conform to the needs of the parents.

But our plan is not simply a reproduction of the ordinary boarding school in the country or small town. For it is not the country itself that is so valuable, but work in the country, and work generally, with its wide social connotations of productiveness and earning power. The observation of nature has not only a side that is philosophical and scientific, it has also a side of social experiences that leads on to the observations of *civilization* and the *life of men*.

By work in the country we do not mean that the students should be obliged to work like agricultural laborers. The intensive methods of modern agriculture produce wonders as great as nature itself. The improvement on nature produced not by labor alone, but by the inventiveness of man with the help of the sciences, appears to be a kind of “supercreation” due to the labor of civilization. The first stage of civilization is just that of the transformation of nature to a higher level of beauty and usefulness in her products, and of an apparently miraculous use of the secrets of nature. This is truly a “supra-nature” devised by man. This supra-nature includes the great scientific progress in biology and in chemistry, and a consecutive progress of succeeding generations that makes one wonder at the greatness of man as well as the greatness of God.

Therefore work on the land is an introduction both to nature and to civilization and gives a limitless field for scientific and historical studies. If the produce can be used commercially this brings in the fundamental mechanism of society, that of production and exchange, on which economic life is based. This means that there is an opportunity to learn both academically and through actual experience what the elements of social life are.

Seminar Writing Question(s):

Choose one of the following to respond to:

1. Write about a time when you felt a deep connection to nature.