

Montessori's Erdinker Appendices
Appendix A: Erdkinder
Summary Thoughts and Reflection
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Found at the end her book "From Childhood to Adolescence," Maria Montessori's Erdkinder appendices are interesting for what they reveal about the comparative natures of 3-6 year olds and 12-15 year olds. In the first appendix, titled "Erdkinder," Montessori writes in broad themes of labor and land, production and activity, and the role of these in helping adolescents move from childhood into society. As in her thoughts for Children's House, Montessori speaks here of a prepared environment for adolescents which offers them protection during a time of physical transition, and guidance during a time of expanding vision and involvement. She envisions an environment in which young people can understand the society around them through experiences which reflect the origins of civilization as seen in agriculture, the sciences, and human relations. The Erdkinder essay reveals an education where "...above everything else, the adolescent should have a life of activity and variety."

A Cultural, Historical Context

Published following the second World War, Montessori begins with an observation of the rapidly changing world, noting a cultural transition away from the "securities of the past." She references the loss of crafts handed on within families, and speaks of the confusion brought by "sudden, unexpected demands that cause the necessity for vocational guidance and retraining." Montessori observed human society as being "partly in a state of disintegration and partly in a state of reconstruction," and spoke of the crisis resulting from the development of humanity having not kept pace with that of our external environment.

In this essay, Montessori writes her feelings about schools she felt had lapsed into a state of arrested development, and which were no longer able to fulfill her primary aim for education: that of improving the individual in order to improve society. Adaptability, Montessori states, is the most essential quality for the human personality to prepare for the unforeseen. She wrote, "... for the progress of the world is continually opening new careers, and at the same time closing or revolutionizing traditional types of employment." Anyone who labors, she said, must understand the complex nature of our time in history, for if not they are "... just a pair of hands acting without seeing what relation their work had in the pattern of society."

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Montessori's thoughts here are addressed to a range of societal issues, with the holding of gainful occupation considered as an essential for successful social living. Indeed, the clear thought of the Erdkinder essay concerns the needs of adolescents as they prepare to interact in larger and more significant ways with the society around them.

A Montessori Context

Very young children transition from their immediate family groupings into the broader cultural atmosphere of Children's House, bringing with them a readiness and desire for expanding relationships, new thoughts, and a chance to exercise their unfolding sense of order. In lower elementary, children bring expanding physical energy and an outward gaze, both of which help the patterns spun in the minds of Montessori children to grow. The elementary cultural curriculum deepens their understanding of interdependence, in nature and society, through discussions of planetary development, the growth of humanity, and a history of civilizations. At the same time, children in upper elementary gain a more refined experience and readiness of skills, until finally as adolescents they purposely move to broaden their horizons, interactions, and experiences in society.

So much of Montessori's thinking in the Erdkinder essay is about rooting the expansion of adolescence in ways which are forward moving, community oriented, and which support the goal of helping young people enter society not simply with a skill set for self support, but with the experience and knowledge required for self-sufficiency. In Montessori's observation, however, schools of the time were failing to serve the adolescent in significant ways, particularly in the needs for protection during physical transition, and in aiding adolescents toward a more full understanding of the society they were about to enter.

One can easily make connections between meeting adolescents' need for understanding, and the overall elementary cultural curriculum where so much emphasis is given to the ideal of the cosmic task, revealing how simple things aid one another in an interdependent system of structure and support. When considering this, we may again come to the quote, referenced earlier, where Montessori spoke of the need for everyone who works to understand the nature of our society, that the energy of their production might not be spent without understanding the effect of one's own labor within a broader, cultural context. Here too, Montessori speaks of cosmic tasks, but not now in relation to the planet, nature or early civilizations, themes gracefully drawn across the spectrum of lower and upper elementary's cultural curriculum.

In this writing concerning secondary education, Montessori gathers elementary's broad interdependent views and reflects them onto the economic, civic and relational parts each of us plays in our immediately surrounding society.

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The Nature of Reform: Broadly Stated

The reform of secondary education, Montessori proposes, needs to move beyond basic preparation for a career, and into "a more dynamic training of character and the development of a clearer consciousness of social reality." Schools, Montessori complained, fail to protect the very thing on which the future depends, which she simply terms "human energy." She bemoaned a system where students are compelled to study as a duty, acting without interest, aim, or satisfaction to produce work which is then "measured like inanimate matter," and not seen or "judged as a product of life."

Indeed, Montessori argues that in the adolescent years intellectual capacity decreases, while tendencies toward adult socialization rise. Accompanying this is a growing sense of social order, born through the development of individuality, the learning of responsibility, and the forging of productive relationships. The primary symptom of adolescence, Montessori writes, is “a state of expectation, a tendency towards creative work, and a need for the strengthening of self-confidence... For success in life depends in every case on self-confidence, and the knowledge of one’s own capacity and many sided powers of adaptation.” Reform in secondary education, Montessori states, must then be considered not only in relation to the needs of present society, but with awareness of the vital needs of adolescents as well.

Reform in Relation to Social Life

In light of an adolescent’s increasing involvement in society, Montessori identifies what she calls the “essential reform”, the need to “put the adolescent on the road to achieving economic independence.” But, she notes, this independence has a greater psychological than practical value. She examines the ideal of “work”, and moves toward the position of work itself being of greater importance than the kind of work being done. Education, she notes, should lead young people into broader work experiences, both manual and intellectual, helping them to bind their growing independence to their own expanding sense of self-sufficiency.

Reform in Relation to the Needs of the Adolescent

Here Montessori moves toward the heart of her thoughts on secondary education, reaching beyond the idea of school as a place of educational structure, and toward the

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notion of an educational environment which supports the psychological growth of the adolescent. For there are “two faiths,” she writes, “that can uphold man: faith in God and faith in himself. And these two faiths should exist side by side: the first belongs to the inner life of man, the second to his life in society.”

Addressing the needs of the adolescent in relation to an educational environment, Montessori calls for surroundings in the country, and an open-air life, speaking not of a “school” but rather of a “center for study and work.” The Erdkinder model is one where adolescents move into intentional community away from family and home, planning together and creating physical works on the land on which they live. “The first stage of civilization is that of the transformation

of nature to a higher level of beauty and usefulness,” Montessori notes, and proposes that as Erdkinder students engage their surroundings in this same transformation, using the land itself and their experience as a center for study and work, they too live in the first stage of civilization. Their work on the land raises its beauty and usefulness. They garden, plant and harvest crops, keep animals and, in so doing, experience the same things that people in our first societies did: agriculture, animal husbandry, tool work, and the related sciences these things require. And as they do, they also experience the challenges and rewards of community and social organization. They perceive the need

for communication, the benefit of gathering and directing group energy, a sense of growth in the accomplishment of planned action, and the resulting development of culture within their own group. Erdkinder students learn of civilization, Montessori writes, through their own experience of its origin.

As the essay closes, Montessori changes the direction of this cultural exchange. If, she writes, humans in community can together raise the beauty and usefulness of nature, so too must each of us as individuals rise to a state higher than our natural one. Their success engenders confidence and further action. Facilitating a sense of physical, mental and spiritual self-sufficiency is key to the success of young people in transition, be it from the family to a larger social grouping, or from adolescence into social adulthood.

Toward that end, Montessori devotes the last pages of the Erdkinder essay to a discussion of ways for Erdkinder participants to engage broader society in several contexts, including social interaction, structural cooperation, and economic transaction. Montessori calls for Erdkinder students to engage in the operation a small business, selling products from their land based endeavors, or even operating a hostel, applying their abilities to the realm of commerce and exchange. In the modern world, Montessori seems to say, it is not enough for schools to train young people to get a job. Indeed, Montessori's reforms for secondary education empower young people to create occupations for themselves, moving with a confidence born of awareness, insight, and maturity.

The actions taken by Erdkinder students help them to see society as in a state of ascent from nature. Their experiences teach them that individuals can and should take part in community.

