

# Glimpses of the true adolescent

Louise Livingston listened to David Khan's London lecture on The Montessori Adolescent Programme and took some valuable lessons away with her.

**O**n a beautiful autumn day in October I was most thrilled to have the opportunity to hear David Kahn speaking about the Montessori programme for adolescents. The opportunity was provided by the Maria Montessori Institute, which had invited Mr Kahn to come to Regents College in London to speak on 'Glimpses of the Adolescent' to an audience that included Montessori directresses, students and parents.

David Kahn, executive director of the North American Montessori Teacher's Association (NAMTA), has been instrumental in putting Montessori adolescent education into practice. His innovative implementations include the Hershey Montessori Farm School, the only Montessori adolescent programme in the world that has developed a complete, prepared environment, as described in Maria Montessori's writings, with full boarding facilities, an operating farm and a functioning micro-economy with a community farm market.

We are all aware that in our work with children we are always looking for the true child. This is no less the case with the adolescent. When we think of adolescents the picture that springs to mind is that of the grumpy teenager who is insecure, argumentative, self-conscious and thinks that no-one understands the way they are feeling or the things they are going through.

In addition to this they are subject to the youth culture of today which expects them to behave or dress in a certain manner. Desperate to fit in, they follow suit and those that don't may become ostracised or bullied for being different.

But David Kahn tells us this is not the true nature of the adolescent – the true nature is hidden behind a mask. A mask that may be peeled away if we put the adolescent into an environment specially prepared for his natural development.

The first and perhaps most important point that David made was that a farm school is not about farming. The farm is the prepared environment (a social chrysalis), a safe and warm place in which these vulnerable teenagers can be allowed to change into strong, happy and productive adults.

Maria Montessori described adolescents as "Erdkinder" – children of the land – and she proposed a rural setting in which to prepare an environment for development. The words below, taken from Montessori's *From Childhood to Adolescence*, give us some insight into her reasons for this.

*"Work on the land is an introduction both to nature and to civilisation and gives a limitless field for scientific and historic studies. If the produce can be used commercially this brings in the fundamental mechanism of the 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 of the elements of social life."*

On the farm the students learn to engage through being part of a community. They are expected to do everything themselves – cook, wash, clean and work the land. Any conflicts that arise are resolved by working together. They start to realise that they have to be accountable for everything that they do and that they have to make it work because no-one else is going to do it for them. This starts



David Khan: Instrumental.

them on the road to discovering their role in relation to the community.

One of the principal aims of the environment is that each student reaches a state of flow. David described flow as that state in which an individual is able to find his highest level of engagement. This happens when challenge and skill levels are both high.

Conversely, when skill levels and challenge are low we see boredom and apathy. When flow occurs goals are clear, feedback is immediate, skills match challenge, concentration is deep, problems are forgotten, control is possible, self-consciousness disappears, sense of time is altered and the experience is worth having for its own sake.

The educational syllabus in the farm school can be divided into four areas:

- Preparation for adult life, which covers the study of the earth and living things, the study of human progress and the building up of civilisation and the study of the history of humanity.
- Practical considerations such as housekeeping and working the farm.
- Self-expression, which is encouraged in a number of different ways: not only through music and art but also through a special kind of role-play in which students are encouraged to research the life of someone and then use this information to take on this personality. Students are also given the opportunity to try out a range of physical activities ranging from horse riding to football. Experts are brought in for all these activities.
- Character development.

The personnel working with the students

are made up of several different types of professionals:

- Technical experts brought in to help with many of the practical aspects.
- High school (senior school) specialist teachers to cover particular subject areas such as languages, mathematics or biology.
- Montessori trained people who are there to advise the other specialists and experts on the Montessori approach but who also usually have some other kind of specialist knowledge to share with the students such as an interest in archaeology.

In addition, there are the occupation projects, which involve physical work that must be done on the farm. The student has to identify a task or a challenge and then decide what he needs to know and do to accomplish the task.

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Then, as a group of about five to eight, they will work to acquire the knowledge and proficiency to accomplish the task. The students will always be given a time scale for the project and projects have covered such areas as the cow insemination project, organic gardening, food preservation and woodcraft.

Out of these occupations come many aspects of chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics and so on. The students are encouraged to vary the kind of project they choose so that they get a broader education. However, the rules are always that the occupation follows the student's interest and that the occupation can go as far as the student's interest will take him.

In the farm school, the occupations are the students' materials and, just as in the children's house, the materials have limits so the occupations must honour certain limits. The occupation project must contain two kinds of work – manual and intellectual – and the two kinds of

experience complete each other.

The head-hand connection must be recognised, just as it is in those early years in the children's house. Most students need more than symbolic learning. They need sensory input as well – when the head and the hand are separated problems start to creep in.

In addition, it is important for the farm community to make and sell some kind of produce so that the profits will go towards the running of the school. This is the connection to real life. Running the farm is not a game – it is social development and their actions must have real consequences. So they sell their produce and they have to make the books balance.

As the students live and work together

consciousness and angst that we often observe in the adolescent.

By the end of the day I am sure the question running through everyone's mind was “If they can do it in the United States then why can't we do it here too?” David talked about the Montessori continuum – an education that starts at birth and brings the child through to adulthood with the individual developmental needs of the child being met at every plane. If we want this to be an actuality in the UK we need to start much further back than the setting up of a farm school.

So many of our schools are not even managing to keep their children past four. First we need to solve that problem by giving these children something to



*The Hershey Montessori Farm School, the only Montessori adolescent programme in the world that has developed a complete, prepared environment, as described in Maria Montessori's writing.*

the mask begins to break down – it is impossible to keep up a false image if they are living together. As the mask breaks down the person underneath can expand and there is a budding self-awareness and strengthening of character. David described this strengthening as “valorisation”, a word associated with many different but related characteristics: skilled, strong, a valued member of society, of artistic value, economic value, and capacity to bond – to name just a few.

When we consider all these characteristics together we can see that when Maria Montessori talked about “valorisation” she was talking about a kind of strengthening that affected every aspect of the human personality.

But, of course, the proof of its success is in the product. We heard clips from students – 13, 14 years of age – who were clearly happy, confident, communicative and at peace with themselves. Gone was the insecurity, self-

stay on for – at the moment it is not possible for them to stay in the children's house because there is nowhere for them to go at six. How often do we hear our parents saying they love what their children are getting in the children's house and would love for it to continue? We have to offer them an elementary programme.

If Montessori education is really to be ‘an aid to life’ it must take the child from birth right through to adulthood. Only then will we also get a glimpse of the true adolescent. ■

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