

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR ADOLESCENTS

By Katey Schultz, Core Teacher, 2004

It is the first day of student orientation and I am in a room full of loving, excited, teary-eyed parents. They want to know what their teenagers will study, where we will go backpacking, and how late they can call in the evenings. Why would a family choose to send their child to boarding school at age 12? It is the first question on most people's minds when they learn about alternative education opportunities available for teenagers today.

The short answer is that teens learn best through challenging, hands-on experiences. A consensus community where students have a voice provides a supportive place for this. The long answer, however, has to do with Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Johann Pestalozzi and Mahatma Gandhi.

Today, progressive educators know it is no small coincidence that these major thinkers came to similar conclusions about human nature, and education in particular. Recent brain research has revealed, and Montessori observed, that the growth spurt adolescents experience is almost as dramatic (and potentially traumatic) as the first few years of life. A newborn baby develops physical coordination, language skills, survival skills, and experiences great vulnerabilities. Similarly, an adolescent emerges as a "social newborn," growing physically and emotionally, and solidifying his/her communication skills. Adolescents also require a safe environment because of all the insecurities associated with a time of great change.

"The chief symptom of adolescence," Montessori said, "is a state of expectation, a tendency towards creative work and a need for the strengthening of self confidence." A farm-like setting that necessitates group effort is an ideal arrangement for this age group. "Work on the land has taught me that I can do a lot with my hands and I can do more when I work with others; but this requires trust. When I trust others, I enjoy being around them and I get more done. It's fun doing work with my friends, too!" said Karen Harshfield, a recent graduate of the Arthur Morgan School in Burnsville, North Carolina.

John Dewey would undoubtedly agree. Part of Karen's education included chopping wood to heat the boarding house she shared with three other teens and two houseparents. She also worked on self-designed research projects in the classroom and displayed her work at events open to the public. One of her favorite activities was meal prep chore, preparing and serving lunch for almost forty people. "Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself," Dewey said.

"Life" happens in community. The work that needs doing gets done, differences between individuals get worked out, and support is offered and received on a consistent basis. It is in community that students discover for themselves the value of friendship, kindness, and respect. Teens need support, but they also need a setting in which they can influence real and relevant aspects of their lives. If chewing gum is not put in the trash, what logical consequences could the community decide upon? If a student wants to plan a winter hiking trip, what adult resources and support systems does he/she have to call on? Perhaps Pestalozzi put it best when he said: "Education consists of example and love—nothing else."

Outside of the community, a student's view expands. This social newborn can suddenly apply his/her skills in the world with confidence, creativity, and a sense of duty. "Working out of kindness is so much better than working for an hourly wage. Building a swing set for little kids at Posada Esperanza in Austin, TX was very gratifying," said Brady Smith, a 9th grade student at the Arthur Morgan School. Last winter Brady and his peers hit the road for an 18-day service oriented field trip as a part of their school curriculum. Composed of three staff and nine students, this field trip group applied the concepts of community life to the real world, learning one of Gandhi's greatest lessons along the way: "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

The mark of true learning is that it becomes an integral and natural part of one's life. With support from peers and trust from loving adults, adolescents can accomplish this learning and solidify our future as peaceful, educated citizens of the world.