

## **School for Experiencing Social Life Essential Criteria for a Montessori Secondary School**

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The considerations presented below are the result of thorough literature analysis, thirty years of my own school practice as well as visiting and observing in other countries and the relevant exchange of ideas with my colleagues. Hopefully the focus of thinking is on young people, on a young person who has to function in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's cultures and nations. At the same time one should be aware of the fact that these are only contemplations, realizing how other nations and cultures will pose very different conditions and needs. Working with children and young people should not lead to giving or selling fixed recipes.

### **1. What can or should a pedagogical place of learning for young people look like?**

The core of the realization of a Montessori school for adolescents is to create a school for experience in social life, taking in consideration the particular sensibilities of adolescents. Montessori speaks of the development of individual activity and its use in social life. Indisputable is the growing importance of social learning in this day and age. However appropriate learning fields are still unavailable. The consequences to be drawn from the PISA study are a demand for individual and independent learning in a social framework, this more and more envisioned and required as all-day school.

In view of a self-directing youth society it is optimal when a school for experience in social life could offer a boarding school arrangement or hostels for staying overnight, so the adolescents could live there. The young people should be given an opportunity to find their own way. For this, and not only in Montessori's view, adults are often a hindrance, firstly and unfortunately the parents too. It all comes down to creating a school as a place for experience. Another aim is to provide a school for all children and young people, doing justice to the sometimes individual abilities and talents of the youth growing into adulthood. In this way not 20% of each age group cohort will drop out before reaching the final level, as is the case now. A thing no educational politician mentions too often.

Schools that are true sites of learning for young people should stop thinking about their students in from the neck up terms, but to perceive them as *whole personalities*. Therefore the number of students in such sites of learning will have to be limited, in order to facilitate human interactions. This means for countries with high population density e.g. Germany, the number of students could go up to 500 young people per school. This way the diversity of programs could be maintained and excessive costs avoided. Countries with lower population have the chance to work with smaller groups of students. Not without reason Montessori advocates the location of such a school to be in the countryside: the students are given completely different chances for a really free development, thanks to the spacious environment of the school. Montessori expressed her opinion about architecture (spacious, human friendly, variable, transparent). This means that the school environment provides a

physical and psychological openness. The material and aesthetic design of a school is extremely important, because this design expresses the basic understanding of education.

Apart from the studies, mentioned by Montessori in her *Erdkinderplan* (Land Children Plan) that are critical of the traditional school, there are those that make room for practical and social work. For the grave reproach Montessori makes the secondary schools is their otherworldliness or their insufficient life orientation. Saying this, she does not only refer to subject matter but also to the methods of teaching, both without any relation to real life: "Scholastic machinery is as estranged from social life as if this and all its problems were outside its compass. The world of education is like an island where people, cut off from the world, are prepared for life by exclusion from it". (Montessori 1949/ 1964; p.9)

On the school for experience in social life she says the following: "The general decadence of the schools noted in our day does not come from a lessening of the instruction given to the students but from a lack of concordance between the organization of the school and today's needs. The schools have remained below the level of civilization attained on the outside" (Montessori 1948/1973, p. 131).

These quotations are quite old, but their actuality is alarming, alarming because they make clear, once more, how poor the effects of educational reforms are. From these quotations one can deduce very clear demands or necessities for the pedagogical place of learning for young people: a. *Life orientation*, b. *Analysis of social conditions young people face when are growing up today*, c. *Description of the impact of these conditions on children and young people*, d. *Explanation of their actual developmental pedagogical needs*, e. *Realizing of this learning place according to the specified factors*. However one thing will be clear, that this cannot lead to one model for a Montessori secondary school, because current living conditions are already quite different within one country, let alone in various countries in other parts of the world. Schools should take care to hold on to their free working-conditions agreed upon with the local authorities, so that one can flexibly react to current needs of the students. We must take upon ourselves permanent educational reform and not reject it as a something negative. The order in the schools demanded by some politicians leads to their further stagnation. However the children and young people could very well be engaged in these reforms, because it concerns their own educational institutions.

In such a permanent reform Montessori's pedagogical principles are obviously to be considered e.g. *the principles of individualization, of equivalence, of continuity, of learning autonomy, of preparation, of choice of time, of choice of place of learning*. The laying down of principles/guidelines prevents arbitrariness in the process. Therefore even non-professionals are able to explicitly identify a Montessori secondary school as a school for experience in social life. Apart from the above mentioned principles, consideration should be given to Montessori's statements on anthropology, *the orientation towards sensitivities of juvenile age, the alternating of study and practical activity, the development of a prepared environment in a manner suitable for adolescents etc.* It must be said quite clearly that a Montessori secondary school is something completely different from an elementary school,

because the age difference of young people is of great weightiness: “Since there is a radical change in the person [of a child, editor], there must be a radical change in his education. [...] One must be never treat adolescents as children” (Montessori 1948, p. 102 and 115). To this day nothing has changed.

Montessori has been right in her description of adolescence as well as in the aforementioned principles. This we can learn from changes in our school and education system as discussed that time, regardless whether deduced from brain research or a supposedly new theory then called constructivism. It is a pity and again and again a loss of time mankind fails to learn from the history, even if only from the history of pedagogy where reform educators developed brilliant ideas for the secondary school at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In order to achieve success in learning and socio-cultural development (Bildung) education, a school must be more than just a place of knowledge transfer. Learning for life one needs an all-encompassing context, manifold experiences, relations and ways of interacting. This means there are a lot of other activities, rituals and offerings in such a secondary school. So called studies (teaching) come forth of the experience of young people gained in other fields, therefore the school is and must be an environment for living for students. Entirely in line with Montessori’s philosophy, living will be learned, social responsibility and roles experienced as well as emotional, artistic-esthetical and cognitive learning, while the sensitivity of adolescents is taken in consideration. This way a further condition for the secondary school is formulated: schools should be designed as a *polis* (Peter Petersen spoke of a *Lebensgemeinschaftschule* [life community school], 1950, S. 81) It is a well organized community in which young people learn democracy and its laws just by living together. Hartmut von Hentig has translated these ideas for our time: we ourselves are the aim of education, the most difficult test for our education is the way we live as citizens in our polis. This citizen realizes a high level of individuality and engagement living in a community, eliminating Cyclopes. (Hentig 1996, S.206/207). Therefore all education is a political education. This applies to the place of learning too.

## **2. What is the essential content of work plans and study plans in the Land Children Plan of Maria Montessori?**

Nowadays young people will only then embrace the content and the courses of a secondary school, if these substantiate questions of meaning. It is only possible to find a satisfactory answer following the road Montessori charted: on the one hand examining the needs of adolescents and on the other hand the demands of the surrounding culture. Partially both areas are covered. Montessori’s curriculum for the secondary school is relatively survey-able, but rather complex in detail:

1. *Practical activities*
2. *Social activities*
3. *Plans for study and work*

The above mentioned three components should be held onto and will be summarized as follows:

**a) Practical activities** – an essential part of Montessori's observations cover the need of the adolescent to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Basically she is thinking of three types of projects to be run by young people independently: a farmstead, a shop and a guest-house, these being typical human ways of life, in which many social and cognitive competences are asked for. On a slightly romanticized green wave this has led to the assumption that first of all a farmstead can be understood as a prepared environment for young people, without bearing in mind that this is not typical in Germany any more, for the actual part of the peasantry is lower than 2% of the German population. Therefore we should beware of such a one-sided interpretation of the Land Children Plan or of the School of Experience for Social Life.

This is certainly not only true for the farmstead as a typical way of life in Germany. In foreign countries the situation may be quite different, e.g. in the USA, Australia or New Zealand. Montessori, however, attaches particular importance to the economic self-sufficiency of young people. This should be facilitated to enable such self-sufficiency. This is corroborated by the results of recent research on youth: it is extremely important for young people to earn their own money. In any case it is possible to reach this goal by working in a shop or serving guests. For secondary schools it will be relatively easy to offer such a prepared environment.

**b) Social activities** – This term describes an important field of personality development, because man is (from an anthropological point of view) undoubtedly a social being, whose existence is characterized by living in various groups. Nowadays social work and social services, once more are taking on a completely new significance, because isolationistic trends are the main feature of our present-day social development (childhood with a single parent, the 1.3 child family, decrease of honorary engagements, volunteer work in clubs etc.). Children and young people have anyway more difficulties in adjusting to social frames. On the one hand, it is necessary that the schools provide a framework for acquiring ways of social behavior, but on the other hand, also to give opportunities for actively carrying out social services. For the awareness of social reality can only be achieved through participation in social life and social work. In reality this means the integration of the social activities of young people, firstly in school and community (e.g. boarding school), secondly in the opportunities locally given (technical aid organization, fire brigade, work with immigrant children, reading in primary schools, the caring of the appearance of the town, caring for older people, supporting social organizations, churches etc.). Young people experience the importance of their work, they get direct feedback and through it the strengthening of their own self-esteem and independence.

**Plan for study and work (general plan)** – According to Montessori the development of the entire personality means: not only to pay great attention to the intellectual development, but also to the moral and artistic education. This will succeed in individual cases, when the adolescent is given access to opportunities for personal expression (music, rhetoric, visual art

works), when the building of the personality through moral education, math and language finds support and when moreover the adolescent succeeds in establishing a relationship with contemporary culture through education (natural sciences, technology, social sciences and history). This way Montessori more or less created a core curriculum for the whole development of a young person. However, instead of this, nowadays one hears mostly mentioned the substantial and formal competences that are to be acquired.

At the moment the discussion about the educational contents is moving from individual contents towards the *development of competences*. Some interesting statements are made already by Montessori: „ It is necessary then, to prepare the human personality for unforeseen eventualities and not only to keep in sight the conditions to be foreseen by logic alone. We must develop the possibility of supple and live adaptation without rigid specialization. [...] The faculty of adaptation is essential today. Because if progress continues to open new careers , it also continues to eliminate or to revolutionize traditional employments.” (Montessori 1948/1973, p. 97-98).

In the year 1996, the Ministry for Education, Research a Technology issued the so called Delphi Study. About 1000 experts indicated the developments anticipated for the education system for two next decades. Environment, globalization, mankind, technology and social order have been emphasized as the areas of knowledge of particular importance. It becomes clear in this study that the issue is dealing with the complexity dilemma but also with ignorance and probabilities. The following ranking of competences has been listed for the field of school education in the aforementioned study for the year 2020: *a) competence of learning techniques and methods, b) psycho-social human competence, c) foreign languages competence, d) media competence, e) intercultural competence, f) special subjects competence and g) other competences*. It is quite clear that the transfer of basic knowledge in school has a only a subservient function. At the moment the Delphi Study is subject to updating and the results awaited with high expectations.

In view of Montessori's demand for a special position of the subject history, interesting implementations can be found in the contribution of Oskar Negt (1999, p. 236-238). In his opinion the historical competence will elicit the human ability to remember and to envision utopia's. Just now in the world of accelerated technological development, fast devaluation and revaluation of things, dealing with time structures and with the time in many aspects, is another indispensably required competence. This competence relates to time management in the context of the increase of free time and life time. The historical competence consists of the knowledge of history, of the formation of a society, its social structures, its political laws of development and one's own life history. The ability to remember is a prerequisite for the embracing of Utopia.

For a Montessori secondary school requirements for the creation of a new school, could and should be the consideration of the developmental- psychological situation of the young people, as well as the researching and laying down of the basic competences as described above. This includes the introduction of independent learning which is a specific feature of all

Montessori institutions, as the principal task of contemporary schools. There is no doubt that the development of core curricula for the secondary school, as currently is the case for the state school system, is a step in the right direction. Learning as a self-activated process will be successful only if this learning is on the one hand useful but also highly significant for the learning person. Attention is then the natural effect. On the other hand, self-evaluation should be possible so that the dignity of young people is not violated, respect principally maintained.

### **3. What principal qualification must be expected in adults who work with adolescents in accordance with Land Children Plan?**

In order to achieve as wide acceptance in the population as possible and to make it possible to implement the Montessori's pedagogy as the pedagogy for all children, it will remain absolutely **essential that the teachers are graduates from officially recognized colleges and universities**. The secondary schools deliver as a rule the highest number of end qualifications (diplomas) to be achieved in a society. Therefore **the professional competence** of adults employed there should be impeccable. Nowadays there should not be one teacher for as many subjects possible areas any more. **Specialists are required who will support the adolescents in a highly professional manner**. This also means that an adult is accepted by the young people, because they detest nothing as much as dilettantism.

Moreover additional qualifications are in any case important. Facilitating independent lifelong learning **requires methods competence on the part of the adult. Basic pedagogical and developmental-psychological knowledge of adolescence as well as of brain and thinking development is absolutely necessary** for this age level. In the same way the principle of freedom and independence remains unchanged. It is all about of an age-specific match between guidance and support, to enable the furthering of the extension of the pedagogical relation understood as a support for the enhancement of the personality, tolerance for the seemingly provocative behavior, setting boundaries and rules, and never treating a young person like a child. What did Montessori say about this? „Respect for young people is essential. One must never treat adolescents as children. They have passed that stage. [...] The young must be left with sufficient liberty to act according to individual initiative.” (Montessori 1948/1973, p. 115). In this context, Montessori also speaks about the necessary familiarization of the adolescent with boundaries and rules, which prevail for the institution as a whole. Certainly not an easy task for the adults involved.

It is therefore clear that although the highest importance is attached to the *personality of a teacher*, whose development is in fact also a self-activated process. The presentation of subject contents is only one side of the coin. The other side consists of **the development of the teacher's role in forms of independent and self-determined work**. On the one hand **this role encompasses a preparatory function and on the other in a moderating and assisting function**. Owing to the fact that a teacher-educator in every respect presents the adult model, **long lasting presence is expected**. On this Montessori says: “The teachers

should have the possibility of living in the school itself, taking upon themselves a part of the chores and participating in the life of the house. ... The young teachers -men and women- will also come from outside to teach. They must of course, be qualified to teach in a secondary school. But this does not mean that they will be free to teach by their own methods. On the contrary, they must adopt the methods of the institution in order for their collaboration to be effective . . . . On the other hand, they ought not to be present in too great number: the minimum capable of teaching the material according to the requirements arising from the method of the school.” (Montessori 1948/1973 p. 124)

From these quotations it is clear that obviously **an additional training is necessary, if the teacher wants to start independent forms of work without just leaving the students alone**. The coherence of theory and practice should be understood, otherwise the independent forms of work become a fixed method which will then turn out to be convenient for the teacher. **Therefore, it should be mentioned again that the teacher must have the necessary knowledge of anthropology and developmental psychology of the child and youth as the basis for meaningful methodical didactic decisions**. Principally the command of several methods will be expected, for independent learning will not be manifest only in free work. **The skill in observation is the core competence** of a teacher and forms the basis for providing a prepared environment adjusted to the student. Because the principle of independent activity demands an environment with a pre-ordering advisory function. Therefore it is necessary **to gain the ability of proper intervention, of control of error as well as expertise and professional competence that increases with the age of the students**. The teachers' everyday working life consists of lessons but also moderation. Since individualized learning leads to very diverse levels of learning in the individual students, the teacher should keep track of the learning and performance levels of each student. This however results in intensive bookkeeping also on the teacher's part. The more independent the student's work, the more precisely the monitoring by the teacher must be, not in the form of control, but as the preparation of a network that will catch the young adult in case of an emergency, should he lose his way. This emphasizes the importance of the **fundamental attitude of the teacher, which consists of an educational relationship with the young person, characterized by an attitude of love, patience and respect**. In order to improve the quality of his work it is necessary **to increase the communicating abilities and to extend an inner school teachers' communication network**. **The cooperation in teams** is necessary as well as mutual sitting in on classes and regular conferences. This means the *de-privatization of teaching activity*. Not the closed door of a class room and silence are the features of an open learning atmosphere but an open door inviting visitors to a place where animated and active people are busy.

A further consequence of such type of learning asks for the development of **alternative forms of performance rating**. The current ways of dealing with the young adults where procedures and social progressing are concerned must be coordinated, the famous teacher's freedom of methods does not exist, most of all this often means pedagogical arbitrariness. In the meantime good training courses are on offer for teachers-educators in secondary schools. (In any case it is correct to separate the training courses for ages 12-18 years from other

Montessori training courses, to avoid problems associated with time and content. Undoubtedly it makes sense to agree on minimal standards and end levels for these training courses, so that potential participants can get an orientation.).

Without the construction of solid educational relationship, a *professional relationship competency*, all subsequent acts of the educator-teacher will be meaningless for adolescents, because the improvement demand of integrity of the single individual should be met by the adult with invariable moral and ethical demands on themselves. Authenticity and the forming of personal authority are to be focused upon when both parties want to have sensible working and development conditions (warmly to be recommended in this context are the studies of Jesper Juul, who clearly states that children and adolescents develop optimal when they are together with adults, who are ready and able to take over the leadership, i.e. the ability to plan and to continue pedagogical processes leading to desired objectives without harming the personal integrity of the children and adolescents and the ability to watch over the process with personal authority. The leadership by the adults consists of the following components: authenticity, interest, appreciation, involvement, decision and conflict. [Juul / Jensen 2005 p. 104]). The adolescents have the right to be themselves, they also have the right not to be changed by adults, just because they are adults. The responsibility of adolescents is developed in an optimal manner when they are together with adults who are practicing responsibility instead of preaching it. Furthermore the peer group obviously plays an important part. When youth becomes its own identity group, caused by their complete withdrawal from the adults, a phenomenon which can unfortunately frequently be observed nowadays, this leads to completely different problems, that cannot be dealt with in this article.

#### **4. How can the essential elements of the Earth Children Plan such personal and economic self-sufficiency, decision making competence and learning in a peers community be incorporated?**

The answer to the question presented above is closely connected with the statements in paragraph 2, because they relate to the contents and organization of a secondary school. There are two central aspects of the live in a community: **the importance of economic self-sufficiency** and the *meaning of social service*. Contemporary youth research focuses on both aspects.

**The need of the adolescent for economic self-sufficiency** through self-responsible work is indisputable. Recent studies indicate that more than one third of all students take their jobs in order to earn money for their expensive hobbies and or to become independent from their parents. Simultaneously there is social interest in introducing adolescents into the world of economy. Since some time there are **initiatives from the economy encouraging students to establish and run their own mini-enterprises and supporting them in this effort**. That type of **mini-enterprises** can be realized without much trouble in each secondary school: **organization of events, production of post and greeting cards, sale of T-shirts, production of toys or jewelry, IT services, caretaker services, baby-sitting service, guided regional tours, visit cards, youth magazines, music cd's, guided city walks,**

**customer service, party service** etc. It is necessary to explain the financial framework, the paperwork concerning taxes, bookkeeping etc. At the moment about 10.000 mini-enterprises are run by about 120.000 students in Europe; they are even part of networks and compete with others. Certainly the situation must be taken serious i.e. the young people should be given the opportunity to earn money. It is clear that this comes close to Montessori's idea of a shop and a guesthouse.

**The activity in mini-enterprises not only stimulates business thinking and acting in direct relation to the economic reality but also gives an orientation for a future professional life, an aspect not to be underestimated.** The young entrepreneurs mention as **their most important experience the opportunity to work in a team, to communicate with others, to take the initiative, to resolve problems on their own, to take over responsibility, to analyze constructively different expectations and viewpoints, to get to know their own strengths and weaknesses, to obtain an insight into the processes and organization of an enterprise as well as into the market economy and its principles.** (Institute of German Economy 2001/ 2002, p.2f). Such self-responsible activity should be more and more expanded from the age of 12/13 on, so that the young people will be given the experience of the usefulness of their activity. It is possible to complete those opportunities with apprenticeships in the companies situated in the vicinity of their school. An optimal solution is to have one's own business on the school premises, perhaps even enabling dual qualifications: leaving school with a diploma for vocational training and one for a general end qualification. Such offers are also available for the same reason in the Waldorf schools and in the schools working in the framework of the 'Landererziehungsheimbewegung' (cabinetmaking, metal work).

The other idea in the reform pedagogy, **to learn the social life in action, to implement a school of experience in social life, as Montessori advocated, can be trained through the takeover of social roles in situations of responsibility.** Obviously this idea is also partially covered by the economic activities described above. However **the essence of economic situations is not always just earning money but also dealing with people. Furthermore one can think of tasks in social fields that have already proved themselves: homes for the elderly and the disabled, hospitals, fire brigades, technical auxiliary services, lifeguards, Amnesty International, international work camps** etc. The value of such experiences should not be underestimated in the process of personality building, because it is a responds the needs of a young person to act in a responsible way, to become engaged and to change the world by the elimination of injustice. The task of a secondary school is not only just to consider the competence in studying and working but also to **lead to socially responsible behavior and to create the fields for practice** In the sense of a holistic concept of human development, **the focus is on the stimulation of social competence. This competence can lead to the readiness to lower one's own aspirations for the benefit of the weaker, to the development of a sensibility for the impediment of physical, psychological and social freedom and to enforce the intention to improve the quality of human life in our society.** This leads us again to the educational concept formulated by Hartmut von Hentig and school democracy, because obviously the young people acting as described above, will have a great impact on their school life. This way **education**

**encompasses the process of self- development through experience, understanding and training, but also through taking on responsibility in a social community, the development of people** who trust themselves to evaluate and to change the social and political circumstances. The young person must be given the leeway to act in the sense above described.

However **the importance of *project learning* and *simulation game* is not be underestimated.** Both strategies make possible many of the experiences described above in a safe situation. *Project learning* also encompasses **learning from real courses of actions.** The aim was and is to act in a purposeful and wholehearted manner in a social environment (see Dewey/ Kilpatrick 1935 p. 163). Project work makes it possible to act in the present and in the future, to define independent project formulations and solutions. Project work is oriented at active learning, as a rule planned together, supported and accounted for by the group interest, its form is often profession and/or society oriented. Project work makes a long term contribution to the humanization and democratization of the school and the society. Therefore its importance must not be ignored (see e.g. Gudjons, 1988).

The *simulation games* are the favorite form of work in the adult education. Their relatively complex structures originating in reality, are reduced to their essential elements. However the reality should not be falsified. Characteristic for the **simulation game is a relatively open political or economical problem situation with several groups of participants with different opinions and interests.** The participants get through the simulation game the possibility to **carry out acts in a playful way.** Therefore the game contains elements of role playing and case study, however it experiences a confinement in the social and/or political and scientific work field from computer simulated planning processes. The game usually goes on for several days.

**The simulation games are characterized by role-playing in groups,** social units which come to decisions in a simulated serious situation on a pending issue. Then the various aspects and social assessments of an problem are worked out and presented by various groups of interest. In the forefront are independence and the ability to make decision, the principal requirements to be met by the young people. Experiences associated with simulation games show that this is a form of learning that is easily accessible for youth and their interests, because said learning and experience situation are met affectively and therefore is a very impregnating process. From the point of view of the school, it is also a case of the combining knowledge of subject matter with the ability to use arguments and to adjust one's position if necessary; it is therefore about performance of transfer. Trained are the basic competences indispensable in a democratic society for instance: communication, cooperation in team work, takeover of responsibility, engagement, negotiation skills as well as a capacity for strategy and finding consensus. In addition, the didactic reduction of a topic in order to create the simulation game leads to an increased imprinting of professional knowledge on the side of the students. This approach is particularly suitable for young people ages 16-18, but it can be also used for young people from age 14.

## **Conclusions**

The young people are to be left in their natural habitat. They need a large public place that gives them room for their own definitions of reality. Studies on youth and violence demonstrate the necessity protected work places for young individuals without the confrontation with sanctioning adults (Negt 1999, p. 113f.). The experience of dignity, respect and acceptance in a social context cannot be estimated highly enough for the development of self-awareness. Such protective frameworks can be provided by a secondary school in the form of all day school or boarding school, because in everyday situations young people are more and more driven to the edge, to a large extent they are even perceived as a threat, which only increases the potential for conflict.

Montessori secondary schools can be pioneers. They can initiate important reform movements for secondary education as cried for by the large number of young people leaving their schools without secondary school qualifications. The challenge of Montessori to be a school of experience in social life for youth has been substantiated with sufficient evidence from youth research results. Such a school is maintained as a central place of learning, today more than ever. The school offers the basic qualifications for vocational education as well as orientation in the society and establishes a framework for citizens acting in a responsible manner in a society, it makes possible creating the experience fields for young people within the school, independent from adults. Therefore the young people may demonstrate their abilities, obtain social approval with direct impact on their self-esteem. The Montessori pedagogues know how to transform the secondary schools and shall have do so. However these schools could sharpen their profile much more than they are doing now, because the standards to be met now exists, but eventually their fulfillment depends on the will of people working in those institutions.

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