In this article, Laurie Ewert-Krocker addresses the Montessori idea of the classroom as a prepared environment in relation to the developmental needs and experiences of the adolescent. She structures her thoughts around categories of activity which fulfill what psychologist Robert Havighurst called “developmental “tasks”, and uses his work as a framework to examine the needs and challenges of an adolescent learning environment.

Ewert-Krocker begins by summarizing the definition of a prepared environment, stating that the term comes from the Montessori assumption that adults do not teach children, but rather that children learn by interacting with their environment, adapting both themselves to the environment and the environment to themselves. In Montessori education, it is the role of the educator to prepare a learning environment which will draw children into acts of self-construction, and to work to connect each child with materials in the environment, thus helping to initiate the learning process. In a prepared environment, the child is the constructor of knowledge, with the environment itself offering both impetus and material for the child’s own acts of self-construction.

In evaluating a prepared Montessori environment for adolescents, Ewert-Krocker poses a number of questions: Is this an environment that offers choices for true engagement? Is it an environment that cultivates self-construction of the whole individual without favoring one aspect over another? Does the environment respond to the developmental needs of its students, or rather to the traditional pressures of academic performance?

Ewert-Krocker asks the reader to consider how a learning environment, rather than curriculum, might be best employed to aid adolescents in relation to their developmental needs. In discussing Robert Havighurst’s writing, Ewert-Krocker explains that Havighurst’s ideas concern the idea of developmental tasks which he associates with the academic, social and emotional growth of adolescent students. Ewert-Krocker discusses how a prepared Montessori adolescent environment can help adolescents fulfill the work of each of Havighurst’s tasks. Converging Havighurst’s and her own thoughts, Ewert-Krocker summarizes the tasks outlined by Havighurst and offers thoughts on how each might be addressed by a Montessori adolescent learning environment. The adolescent, she writes, must…

… adjust to a new sense of the physical self,
  - A prepared environment would provide opportunities for young people to explore the strengths and limitations of the physical changes that are occurring at this time, and find an evolving comfort with them.

… adjust to new intellectual abilities,
  - The environment would invite opportunities for abstract thinking in which adolescents feel both safe and interested.
… adjust to new cognitive demands at school,
  o The environment would offer ways for the students to voluntarily work
    with more complex ideas at their own pace and with support.

… develop expanded verbal skills,
  o In Montessori’s words, the environment should “open the way to
    possibilities of personal expression” in language and the other
    communicative arts.

… develop a personal sense of identity,
  o The environment would offer diverse tools for the development of
    different skills and abilities, and provide each individual with
    opportunities to make real contributions to the community.

… establish a vocational goal,
  o The environment would have opportunities for adolescents to engage in
    real work, helping each to explore his or her ability to do a particular job,
    or other work like it.

… establish emotional and psychological independence from his or her parents,
  o The environment would provide opportunities for adolescents to care for
    themselves, one another, and their environment, and to make decisions
    and solve problems for the community.

… develop stable and productive peer relations,
  o The environment would be flexible enough to allow for the processing and
    working out of challenges, problems and conflicts as they arise. More
    importantly, the importance of peer relationships at this stage is a result of
    the adolescent’s development as a social being in adult society. The
    prepared environment should afford enough diversity for everyone to find
    his or her own unique place. In a small learning community, students
    know one another well and have opportunities to demonstrate their talents
    and abilities. The students’ appreciation for one another’s unique gifts and
    contributions makes for healthy, mature relationships.

… learn to understand and manage his or her own sexuality,
  o The adolescent environment would recognize that the issue of emerging
    sexuality is a legitimate one. In Havighurst’s words, adolescents need to
    develop a “set of attitudes about what it means to be male or female” and
    “incorporate values about their sexual behavior”. The prepared
    environment would help adolescents cultivate healthy relationships with
    both genders.

… adopt a personal value system.
  o The environment would provide opportunities for ethics and values to be
    studied, discussed and tried out in a community which consciously
    processes its progress in community building and civility, and which
    exposes adolescents to a community which builds positive, cooperative
    values.
In summary, Ewert-Krocker notes that the key themes of a prepared Montessori adolescent environment are, first, opportunities rather than requirements, and encouragement rather than judgment. These, coupled with freedom of expression, involvement in community experiences that provide real work, and the chance to make genuine contributions all contribute to an environment in which adolescents work to broaden their expanding cognitive, physical, and social/emotional horizons.