

Notes from “Toward Key Experiences”  
By John Long, NAMTA Journal, Summer 2001  
*Summary prepared by Sheldon Clark*

John Long’s article opens with a comparison of the first and third planes of development, ages 0-6 and 12-18 respectively. Maria Montessori identified both of these planes as times of great change, both physically and mentally. In this article, Long examines several areas where action and movement aid young children’s overall development. He then speaks to the similarities of the developmental needs of adolescent’s in relation to each of these areas. Long goes on to consider the idea of experience itself as a framework for curriculum, and defines a number of “key experiences” for adolescent development.

### **Key Experiences in Adolescent Development**

**Movement** Very young children need to move as they begin to physically explore their world. So, too, do adolescents need activity as they grow into their adult physiology. Physical work enhances their physical development as well as their own inner sense of accomplishment and well being.

#### **Work of**

**the Hands** Like young children, adolescents need to work with their hands. In the classroom, adolescents benefit from manipulatives in math and science. They need to make models, draw charts and create timelines and graphs. They need to build with tools, create art, and experiment with materials.

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#### **Work and**

**Psychic Development** For the young child, the purpose of work is to develop powers of concentration, and the ability to do sustained work. For the adolescent, task commitment and concentration continue to be important. Children in the first plane of development are constructing themselves, almost with the motto “Help me to do it myself.” Adolescents are also in a period of self-construction, only their motto is “Help me to think for myself.”

**Adolescents’ academic and social work should prepare them to make a contribution to the world. They want to do more than simply join society, they want to improve it.**

Montessori believed that we are not preparing students for professional careers as an *end*, but rather as a *means* to join society. Therefore, they need to study society and to understand it. They need to build community within the school, and they need contact with the community outside of the school environment. They need to serve others, and to meet a wide variety of people. They need to share experiences with people who view their own work with a sense of mission, and who see their work in terms larger than themselves. Adolescents need to engage in real work that they can see as being important to others, to their community of peers, and to the larger community.

**Language** Young children are in a sensitive period for the development of language skills. Adolescents need a sophisticated language environment in which they can apply and grow these skills, including opportunities for speaking, listening, reading and writing. They need to develop poise, style and clarity of expression when speaking to a group. They also need to be able to use writing for a variety of purposes, including documenting their own work, writing fiction and poetry, and writing announcements and advertisements. Their writing should range from personal journal writing to expository essay.

### ***The Prepared***

**Environment** For the young child, the prepared environment brings calm and order. It is protective of young children. Montessori compared the first plane's educational environment to an egg, one of nature's most perfectly prepared environments.

Montessori proposed that the best prepared environment for adolescents is one where they can live and work communally. The environment, she believed, should provide adolescents the opportunity to engage in meaningful work, and to maintain a dynamic and cooperative group dynamic, in terms of practical matters as well as the social life among those involved. These kinds of experiences help the adolescent to "valorize" their personalities, to believe through experience that they are capable and effective people. "The consciousness of knowing how to make oneself useful, how to help mankind in many ways, fills the soul with noble confidence, with almost religious dignity." (Montessori)

The first reform in education must be to offer a wider environment and to multiply the possibilities of association and of activity...

Montessori also said: "The greatest element in (society's) construction is the growing sentiment of the conscience of the individual, which develops through, and by means of, social experiences."

### **Experience and Curriculum Framework**

Adolescents want to know about the evolution and functioning of society in the world, the nation, their city. John Long writes that this is accomplished through social interaction with people of different ages and backgrounds in the wider community. At the same time, human nature and experience is examined within academic disciplines such as history, including scientific discoveries, geographical explorations, the relation of humans to the environment, contact between different peoples, war, religion, patriotism, a detailed study of one time period, the life of one person, and the law and government of the present day and nation.

Adolescents must be involved in a variety of activities, in addition to academics, through which they can develop their conscience, values and vision.

Long goes on to identify seven categories of activities which provide key experiences for the social, academic and moral development of the adolescent:

1. Developing personal identity
  - a. journaling
  - b. confronting physical challenge
  - c. vision making/goal setting
2. Developing the intellect
  - a. writing
  - b. literature and history seminars
  - c. development of thinking skills
  - d. study of math, history, science, foreign language
3. Self-expression
  - a. theater and other performance
  - b. public speaking
4. Building community
  - a. overnight trips
  - b. community meetings
  - c. trust activities (i.e. ropes courses)
5. Serving others
  - a. community service
6. Learning the ways of society
  - a. creating marketplace/business activities
  - b. mentorship/apprenticeship opportunities
  - c. outings to justice centers, legislatures, etc.
7. Learning the ways of the natural world
  - a. creation and care of a garden, nature center, greenhouse, etc.
  - b. study of local ecology

### **The Nature of Experience**

The adolescent should have a life of variety and activity which engage them in real work, in real thought, and in solving real problems. Experiences for the adolescent should be rigorous, not frivolous. They should be challenging, physically, emotionally, and socially. Experiences should foster independence and the assumption of responsibility. They should allow for personal reflection and group conversation to better understand the implications of the experience. Educational experience at this level should engage the development of a social consciousness. Experiences should build one upon another, every ending should be a new beginning, and together the experiences should come to be seen as a correlated whole.