

Occupation Projects, the Micro-Economy, and Student Managers: Meeting the Needs of Adolescents

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I have been asked to talk about how we respond to the needs and characteristics of adolescents at the Hershey Montessori Farm School, specifically through three aspects of our program: our occupation projects, the operation of our micro-economy, and the role of student managers in the community. Although David asked me to focus on those three areas because they are intrinsic to the particular program that we have set up, I feel that it's important to reiterate what Linda Davis has already pointed out as a guideline: that we are looking at supporting the development of an individual within the context of a social organization.

In terms of supporting the development of the individual, we're looking at supporting identity formation, emotional independence, economic independence, self-confidence, physical health, intellectual ability, spiritual balance, awareness of one's time and place in history and culture—all of which is growing in the individual, but occurring as the result of interactions with others in a social context. Montessori reminds us often that it is the individual in society that we are aiding in the third plane, and this experience of a legitimate society, a "school of experience in the elements of social life" (Montessori 64), is key to their self-construction.

In terms of the development of the social being, we're looking at the strong drive to be a member and belong to a peer group, which I think is the primary internal directive of an adolescent: to feel genuine membership in a community, to have an identity in that community, and to personally contribute something worthwhile to that community. Later on we'll talk about valorization, but for me, belonging and contribution are the avenues to valorization. Adolescents must be able to experience division of labor, cooperation, decision-making, and how human social organization works, even if the organization is not as complex as that in the real world—and perhaps *because* the experience is simpler than that in the actual adult world. I don't think any of us feel completely comfortable with the complexity of the social organization we have to deal with in the adult world. In fact, we experience a great deal of social disharmony on a day-to-day basis. But what we create for adolescents as a prepared environment must be a microcosm of the world, a simpler and more ideal experience of a social order, which they can internalize. It must be a model of social cooperation, of respect for diversity, of problem-solving, negotiation, tolerance, civility—not without conflict, but with workable methods for resolving conflict. Adolescents must experience production and exchange at its fundamental level, and they have to experience purposeful work—all of which is a lot to ask of a program.

Figure 1. Diversity of Opportunities Available in a Full-Time Land-Based Program

- Building operation and maintenance
- Innovations in energy use and technology (solar applications)
- Raising and marketing of produce
- Raising of food for community consumption
- Woodshop production and sales
- Ceramics production and sales
- Honey production and candle-making
- Maple syrup production and sales
- Firewood harvest / hardwood harvest
- Bed-and-breakfast proprietorship
- Seasonal sales events (holiday baskets, wreaths, pancake breakfasts)
- Raising of livestock for consumption and sales
- Operation of commercial kitchen
- Operation and maintenance of waste treatment system
- Community service opportunities
- Radio station operation
- Accounting and business management of micro-economy
- Photography / art production for documentation and sales

Whenever I talk to people about our program, I try not to promote a particular programmatic perspective, but our perspective at the Hershey Montessori Farm School happens to be a full-time boarding perspective, so I have to speak from that point of view. It's not just a land-based experience we're dealing with, but a *full-time* land-based experience, and that makes a huge difference in what we can do in a day, in a week, in a month, in a year. A full-time land-based program allows for a high level of ownership. If you live at the school, in a house, on the land, you must get up and deal with the animals every day, and they become yours. You become responsible not only for their upkeep and care, but for the births and the deaths, and the community decisions about whether to slaughter or not to slaughter. In a full-time land-based program, you are occupying the land in a unique way. You are stewards of it—responsible for where its water goes, what happens to the quality of its soil, when there might be potential for pollution, how its resources are managed: These are your personal problems and responsibilities. They become the students' personal tasks, which is a very different orientation than when you're borrowing the land or just visiting it. It also allows for—and this is what I feel is the best and most difficult part about what we're able to do—a diversity of activities for which students can become uniquely responsible and have a unique opportunity to be an expert and a contributor (see Figure 1). It's a fuller microcosm of the adult world because it's full-time.

Students do not experience all of these tasks because that's how division of labor works. You become an expert and a responsible person in the area that you adopt, learn about, and take responsibility for. The areas can be as diverse as animal husbandry and energy and technology uses, like solar applications or bio-diesel fuel production. In our program the areas include the raising and marketing of produce, raising our own food and consuming it, taking inventory of it, making decisions about what we can eat and cannot eat; woodshop production and sales; ceramic production and sales; honey production; production of maple syrup; operation of the commercial

Figure 2. Manager Positions

- Sheep/Goat Manager
- Cow Manager
- Bee Manager
- Horse Manager
- Pond/Wastewater Treatment Manager
- Kitchen Manager
- Inventory Manager
- Hospitality Manager
- Community Service Manager
- Special Events Manager
- Bed-and-Breakfast Manager
- Coffeehouse/Music Manager
- Publications Manager
- Video/Photography Manager
- Firewood Manager
- Sugar bush Manager
- Trail and Outdoor Space Manager
- Sports Manager
- Business/Accounting Manager

kitchen; the raising of livestock; operation and maintenance of a waste-treatment system that is completely on site, talking to the EPA about expanding the system.

It is important that the experiences feel adult-like and real and that the students be introduced to these possibilities over a three-year period. As seventh- and eighth-year students, they're introduced to avenues of social organization and division of labor through our occupation projects, which they have some choice in. Do they get absolute free choice? No, because the projects occur according to the needs of the farm and its various businesses. Certain things happen in the fall. Other activities occur in the spring. If you're a beekeeper, you can't decide when you want to work with the bees. If they're producing the honey in the fall, and that happens to be now, that's when you do your work. So there are limitations to free choice because the environment helps to define the choices. There are also limitations in our

needing to see that the students have an overall balanced education. They cannot be involved in every single animal occupation; along the way they need to do some project work that connects them to physics and chemistry and plant work as well, so there are practical as well as programmatic limitations to free choice.

By their third year, our students have been involved in and studied a number of occupation projects and have also participated in the micro-economy, which is a separate economy that the Farm School runs completely outside of the operating budget of the school. The micro-economy comprises all of the business aspects of the farm, including all the minor businesses of sales and production, the running of our bed-and-breakfast, and the selling of our produce and maple syrup. As with any system of businesses, it requires that we pay our bills and meet our costs every year, which is not an easy thing to do.

By the time a student is a ninth-year student, he or she is invited to apply for a management position in one of the areas listed in Figure 2, and has very likely had a previous experience in an area that they enjoyed, adopted, learned from, and had the opportunity to uniquely contribute to. Students apply for the position, have an interview, and then take on a management position that is as close to adult-like as we can get. Any cost analysis, any decisions about purchases, any decisions about labor and when it has to happen, and putting crews together to make it happen, fall on the shoulders of this student manager, with the adult standing to the side making sure that success is possible, but allowing the student to do as much of the managing work as they can on their own.

We had a record number of managers this year, our sixth year of operation, which is a situation we are pleased with; the culture feels established, and the older students are telling younger students: "This is how it is. This is what you need to do. This is the way we do things here."

Becoming a manager now has the status of respect across the board in the community. We had more students apply for management positions this year than we had positions available, and nobody is criticizing or mocking or undermining the kind of responsibility that the management position requires. Many students describe their management experience on applications to private high schools.

For example, we just completed our first-ever whole community Harvest Festival. It was a Saturday event, and we raised money for a local charity. We had pony rides and a bake sale and a rummage sale and a pancake breakfast and carnival games and wagon rides and craft tables and just as many possible farm experiences as we could put together. It was all organized and run by a student manager, our Special Events Manager, who coordinated all of the events, assigned student crews, ran around with a clipboard and made sure everybody was okay, attended to what they needed, made parent phone calls to get volunteers, collected the money, and counted the cash. It was hard work—as anyone who has organized a major fundraising event knows.

Our Kitchen Manager runs the kitchen by herself one evening a week without adult help to make dinner for thirty people, with just a little bit of help from adults in the prepping of food in advance. In addition to that weekly job, she also oversees the ordering of food for the boarders, and just walks into the kitchen any time something is going on and says, “I’m here. What do you need? What can I do?” She also diplomatically handles complaints about menus and the balancing of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food options.

The combination of the occupation projects, the management positions, and everyone’s involvement in the micro-economy, all of which—as I keep emphasizing—have an academic background as well, results in diverse opportunities for unique contribution. These elements make it possible for individuals to feel of special value to the community, to feel that they can reach a state of expertise in the service of others. Even if a manager knows that somebody who was in their position last year made similar contributions, their current position still feels important to them, building self-confidence, valorizing them.

The land-based, full-time community is a pretty genuine microcosm, a small society, a social experience that truly communicates how division of labor works for human beings and how production and exchange are fundamental human interactions. It offers practical experience because the land, the “house,” the greenhouse, the gardens, the woodshop are an integral part of everyday life. The opportunity for the work of the hands is not only frequent, but connected back to theoretical knowledge and general education over and over again. Hopefully our students see those connections between what they’ve read about, studied about, and debated over as they are plowing, planting, harvesting, preserving, and producing—and see that in both the work of the hand and the work of the head, they find reflections of their own humanity.

REFERENCE

Montessori, Maria. *From Childhood to Adolescence*. 1948. Trans. A.M. Joosten. Rev ed. Oxford: Clio, 1996.