

INTO THE CITY: NEAR NORTH MONTESSORI SCHOOL AND THE USES OF ENVIRONMENT

by Rick Mosher

Rick Mosher's coining of the word Urbkinder reminds us that the city provides a broad environment for learning with key experiences being defined by the student's choice of in-depth involvement. Quoting John Long, these city experiences are real, engaging, connected to thought, allow for personal reflection, and rely on the teaching moment. Rick Mosher feels that the urban experience should be clearly differentiated from that of the work on the land, but his characterization of the needs and tendencies of adolescents shows little difference from unfolding development on the farm.

For more than ten years I have been a teacher in the twelve- to fourteen-year-old level at Near North Montessori School in Chicago. Through the years, the teachers and administrators at our level have been constantly shaping the program, and our work has led to some ideas about what it means to be a Montessori school in a major metropolitan area. Tonight I will offer some thoughts about the theory and practice of an adolescent program in a city and give an example of the type of work that typifies this model.

Throughout this presentation I use the word *city* deliberately, instead of *urban*, because in my experience the word urban is often used to describe environments that are not truly in a city. I'll return to this idea in a minute, but first I will give some information about our school and how Near North's position as a school in a city is critical to the design of our adolescent program.

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Our program is relatively large for a Montessori school; we have more than 550 students beginning with an infant community and continuing through the twelve-to-fourteen level. There are three classes in our adolescent program, each with about thirty students and a mixed seventh and eighth grade. Each classroom has a head teacher and an associate teacher, and the expectation is that our teachers have completed NAMTA's Montessori Orientation to Adolescent Studies. Our school is private, with a relatively low tuition compared to the other leading private schools in Chicago. We have a parent board of directors. Our student population is racially diverse, and our families are closely involved in all aspects of the school, including fundraising. Most of our students will go from Near North to one of the city's selective enrollment public high schools or other competitive secondary schools, and they will generally have to get themselves to and from those schools, and safely navigate encounters with other young people and the city in general.

Geographically speaking, Near North is truly a city school. The landscape that surrounds us is completely developed and almost totally paved. We are one block from a public transportation stop for buses and the subway line connecting downtown Chicago with O'Hare International Airport. The Kennedy Expressway, one of the busiest highways in the country, runs within view of our windows. A major city thoroughfare runs past our front door, filled with traffic, including taxis and buses. The windows of all three classrooms in the junior high have what some call a "million-dollar view" of the Chicago skyline, which is backlit in the morning and reflects the setting sun in the late afternoon.

TOWARD A MONTESSORI CITY MODEL

For many years my co-conspirators and I have been working to define the true character of a Montessori adolescent program in a city environment. Through the years we've been guided by a critical question: Who is this program for? Obviously it's for the students, and like any Montessori program, it must address the needs and characteristics of those students. Our students are citizens of a great city, and like anyone else their needs are shaped by their environment. So I'd like to talk for a minute about the needs and characteristics of the third-plane child in relation to a city program like the one at Near North.

Adolescence is a time of growing interest in adult roles and adult society; according to Dr. Montessori, “this is the time, the sensitive period, when there should develop the most noble characteristics that would prepare a man to be social, that is to say, a sense of justice and a sense of personal dignity” (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 63). The term *socialization* has been used to describe the process of finding a place in society, which is of course distinct from *socializing* (although as we all know adolescents are pretty good at that too). Socialization speaks to a young person’s urgent need to know what it is like to be an adult, to experiment with roles and meaningful work in the real world of adult society.

Our third-plane people want and need to picture themselves in the world, to imagine adult life, to try on occupations; in short, to catch a glimpse of their future selves. As I have already said, we must consider the environment in which our students will do this work. Adolescents in a city need real experience with a city environment; otherwise they will have a hard time becoming truly socialized. They need to acquire the ability to move through their environment and to see the opportunities as well as the hazards in the place where they will soon live and work. “For him to progress rapidly, his practical and social lives must be intimately blended with his cultural environment” (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 13).

This idea, that the environment has much to teach the child, is of course central to Montessori practice. One reason the prepared environment of the Montessori elementary classroom is so powerful is that the lessons in practical life are relevant to the day-to-day experience of the children: time management, cleaning and health, care of self, grace and courtesy, serving guests, community building, and so on. The twelve- to fourteen-level classroom, by contrast, has no Montessori materials in the official sense, no agreed-upon

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prepared environment. But does that mean the adolescent has no need for such an environment? Of course not. Like the elementary child, the adolescent preparing for adulthood needs environmentally based lessons in practical life that are relevant to people of his or her age. But since there are typically no materials, no real prepared environment in the third-plane classroom, what do we do? Where do we find such an environment for the adolescent?

In the farm school model, the answer lies in the work of the farm. In a city school like Near North, the answer lies in the life of the city. If we are serious about preparing our city-dwelling



adolescent students for practical life, then we need to put them into the city environment in ways that are safe, meaningful, and real. In this way we may facilitate, or at least not impede, the adolescent work of socialization.

Our young people need preparation for adult life: for riding trains and buses, for negotiating traffic and crosswalks, for moving with and against crowds, for finding the right volume in public places, for enjoying restaurants and the theater. They need to know how to stay safe. They need to develop situational awareness and street smarts. But even more importantly, they need to see and feel the tremendous human potential that their city holds for them. They need to tap into the electric surge of culture and politics, of building up and tearing down, of kindness and also of cruelty. It's their city; they are ready to live in it.

I will return to this subject in a moment, and suggest a specific work that puts our young people into real contact with their environment. But first I would like to discuss what I see as a key difference between the practice of the city model and Montessori practice in other models.

THE URBKINDER: FINDING THE GARDEN IN THE CITY

I mentioned at the start that the distinction between city and urban schools is a meaningful one, and that the word *urban* is used to describe a wide range of geographical locations, not all of which are in or even near a city. This is an essential difference between the city model and those programs that claim the word *urban* but seek to replicate the farm model experience. These adolescent programs are in a nonfarm place, a village or suburb or even a city, but still seek to base environmental learning on the features of the rural landscape and the activities of the farm. Conversely, the city model seeks real-life lessons and meaningful work in the city environment itself. In a city, one may find the occasional chicken coop or vegetable garden, but these are accessories of the city experience, not key components; instead we find subways and skyscrapers, and it is on these realities of place that we seek to base our pedagogy.

I think it's essential to note here that the goals of the farm, urban, and city models are the same: We all seek real work in a real environment with real consequences. On the farm, if the student fails to milk the cow, the consequence is not an angry teacher, it's a cow in distress. This is wonderful, even revelatory: It's how the real world works! The student has let the cow down, and that upset cow is the real-world consequence that he or she must face.

But in the city there are of course no cows. If our city school attempted to teach responsibility by acquiring a cow to milk, it would not only be inconvenient but it would also constitute a too literal interpretation of the farm model. Faced with this conundrum, we turn to analogies: There are no cows in the city, but there are plenty of bus drivers. If we are on an outing and one of our students shows up to board the bus with incorrect change or an expired fare card and holds up the line, he or she will likely be faced with an angry bus driver. If the teacher steps in and mediates the encounter, the lesson is lost. But if the teacher holds back and lets the student negotiate the issue on his or her own, then we are getting somewhere. This is the key difference I have in mind: The city model does not seek to replicate the *practice* of the farm model, but does strive to adhere to the *principle* of the farm model, and by extension to all Montessori principles.

So I am here to speak up for the city as a valid location for a Montessori education in general, and for an adolescent program specifically. Call it the city model, or, if you will permit me to be a bit heretical, the *Urbkinder*. Certainly there are other adolescent programs out there thinking and acting along these same lines, and I hope to become part of a dialogue that reaches toward establishing best practices for a city-based school. One of the practices that we have found to be meaningful at Near North is a work called *city trips*. I would like to show you how this work succeeds in giving our young people lessons in practical life in a real environment.

PRACTICAL LIFE LESSONS IN THE CITY LANDSCAPE

City trips, in their simplest form, are forays into the landscape in which we try to give our students every opportunity to learn from the environment. Our goal is to give young people real experi-

ence with their own world without an adult interceding, or worse, helping. Some of the qualities of city trips will be familiar to those versed in going out with the younger children, but the stakes are much higher, and ultimately the goal is different, because the third-plane person will soon be out in the world with no guardian and no guidance. Getting them face to face with their city is the goal. After all, the environment can only teach if we let it.

City Trips Are Student-Led

In these works we follow the child, metaphorically and literally. We walk behind them, let them get lost, refuse to rescue them. If they get on the wrong bus, we keep quiet and wait for the inevitable moment when



one of the group looks up at and says, “Wait, you guys.” Then it is up to them to figure out what to do next. This happens on occasion, and it is a wonderful thing. But more typically the policy of following the child makes for a rather uneventful afternoon for the teacher because the less contact they need with us, the better. Even pleasant conversation between students and teacher constitutes a kind of mediation, and for that reason teachers are encouraged to hang back, observe, and stay out of the students’ way. The removal of the teacher from the experience demands, as Dr. Montessori said in the Third Lecture, “a higher form of self-control...which is at the base of social education, and has to be worked out and actually experienced in the sensitive period during which man is creating his social personality” (183).

City Trips Are Fail Safe Experiences

The adults are there for a reason, though it is expressly not to rescue a student from an uncomfortable encounter. We are protectors, and occasionally a student needs to be prevented from getting hurt; typically this involves crosswalks. On very rare occasions a teacher needs to step in between a student and another individual, usually another young person, to prevent a fight. I can recall having to do this exactly twice in the past ten years. It is meaningful that the protector role is so seldom needed. I would also like to argue that the presence of a protector means that the environment is “prepared.” There is a layer of artifice between the prepared and the real environment in the lower elementary classrooms. This removal from reality is critical to successful learning; similarly, our students will be stressed, but not fully exposed to adult consequences, because of a preparation of the city environment.

City Trips Are Regular, Scheduled Events

We go out as part of our weekly routine, with repetition and normalcy being key to the feeling that this is simply what we do because we live here. We are not tourists, so we don’t go to Navy Pier to ride the ferris wheel. We also do not go on guided tours or visit museums. These destinations are often worthy experiences related to class work, but they are not city trips. These trips are also not class work as such, not a work, not a lesson. The outing is of course ungraded, and assessment comes in the form of reflection if at all. They are distinct from projects with structure and due dates

and required components, though our projects may relate to what we experience on city trips, and we may use the skills we learn on city trips in pursuit of material for, say, a long-term project on ethnic neighborhoods.

City Trips Are Process, Not Goal-Oriented

Our goals are frequently vague or mundane, with good reason: Going into the city should not be a big event or a special trip for our young people. They live here; they belong here. They are going into their city just like all the other residents, as a normal part of life (and this, of course, is part of socialization). So our goals for city trips, or more properly our excuses to enter the city environment, are sometimes simple prompts such as *marzipan*, *water taxi*, *pho*, or *marriage license*. Sometimes we let them roam a main thoroughfare, or have an open lunch in a city neighborhood with specific streets as boundaries. Others are more directive: find and explore the city's little-known underground pedway system, retrieve a handful of lakeshore sand, build and photograph a snowman in Grant Park, and so on.

The lack of structure and goals in city trips raises what I think is an interesting question: Are these outings part of a pedagogy of place? On the surface it would seem so: They are intensely concerned with a clearly defined place, and

It is true that there is an element of anarchy and real danger in the city, but these things are everywhere in the real world, and it is this real world our young people are about to enter, unguarded. The hazardous nature of city life makes it more imperative that we get our young people out into the world, in fail-safe mode, so they can learn from mistakes without getting actually hurt.

the lesson is based on that place. David Kahn has defined pedagogy of place as work in which it is “experience that initiated the study, not the study that called for the experience, as in the elementary” (vii). But since there is no study per se in a city trip, no syllabus, no structure to speak of, and since the true meaning of pedagogy is to lead a child through a course of study, exactly the opposite of what happens during these events, it seems to me a conundrum best left for another time.

City Trips Are Open to Diversion and Interruption for the Sake of Discovery

We go wherever the moment leads us. We follow Dr. Montessori's exhortation, "Let us take another look at the [boy] scouts but instead of using the word 'scouts,' we shall use the South-European term 'explorers.' The word itself gives us a pretty good idea of what we mean: to explore the world! It is a great task, which opens up a wide road" ("The Third Lecture" 205). For this reason, city trips are full of teachable moments.

City Trips Are Rich in Practical Life Lessons

To list all of them would be impossible, but they include learning the city street grid, how addresses work, where the streets are, which bus to take, where to transfer, situational awareness and street smarts, dressing for the weather, what to do when the turn-style eats your fare card, what to do when you're lost, how and when to give money to a street musician, how adults act in public, how to order in a restaurant, how to walk on a crowded sidewalk, north-south-east-west, how to tell if you're going the wrong way, how to get going the right way, what to do if you're separated from the group, being a good citizen, and being a leader.

A list like this only scratches the surface of the action in a city trip, but to stop and delve into all of the nuances of the experience would require much more time than I have here. I think it is meaningful to let a true sense of the experience build from a litany of moments. In that spirit, I would like to offer another list, this one is a blow-by-blow description of a recent city trip.

City Trip: Marzipan

This work begins when a teacher puts the word *marzipan* on the board, and that is all we do. It is now the work of the children to define, find, buy, and sample marzipan. The work is roughly as follows: What is marzipan? Where is it? Call the shop to see if they're open and actually have marzipan, get the address (grid work), go on Google Maps, find train lines and devise routes, and get in their groups. Determine if we have money and a fare



card. Leaders emerge, we dress for the weather (or not; their call, their consequence), we hit the streets, encounter citizens in the subway and at the card dispenser, we exhibit platform safety and decorum, and then we board the train and determine if we need to transfer. We emerge from subway, use the grid to find address, walk city streets, show grace and courtesy at the goal, experience marzipan, share the experience, find our way back to train, and get back to school in time for carpool. All trips have some things in common, but there is enough variety built into the journey to keep things interesting.

THE CITY INVADDED MY LESSON: LOCATING THE KEY EXPERIENCE

Often the city will interrupt our exercise with an unexpected lesson of its own. My associate, Cynthia Castiglione, tells the story of a city trip to a frigid lakeside park one afternoon. The ostensible purpose of the trip was to experiment with snow as a sculpting medium, but as usual the more relevant work was in dealing with the city in all its phases, in this case, a cold, dark winter. On this day the real lesson was delivered by a homeless person who approached the group and then collapsed on the pavement, striking his head and opening up a wound that began pouring blood onto the sidewalk. Cynthia called 911. Soon the group could hear the ambulance coming. The paramedics treated the man, loaded him into the ambulance, and left. But of course many questions remained. So Cynthia abandoned the planned activity and took the group to one of the many nearby coffee shops for a discussion. Over hot chocolate, they confronted some of the harsh realities of our city: Why isn't anyone taking care of him, someone asked, which led to a far-reaching discussion about the troubled economy, mental ill-



ness, health care, city government, and so on. The points that the young people raised were powered by their awakening sense of right and wrong, the moral development that is one of the central characteristics of the third-plane person. In this way an unfortunate accident, a chance encounter, was transformed by an aware and opportunistic teacher into a life lesson that her students may well remember for years to come. I would like to imagine that in the future, when they're out in the city with friends and come across a homeless person in distress, they will be able to connect what they are seeing with what they learned first-hand on a frozen Chicago sidewalk some years ago.

When Cynthia first told me this story, I immediately thought of what John Long identified as the key experience. One of our shared goals as teachers is finding these memorable, instructive moments for our adolescents. The qualities of the key experience are summed up in this inspiring description by John Long:

Experiences are real. They engage students in real work, in real thought, in solving problems. They connect students to the real world of nature and society. They arise from the needs and characteristics of the age. They foster independence and the assumption of responsibility. They engage social consciousness. They allow for personal reflection and group conversation in an attempt to better understand the concepts and ideas embodied in the experience. (76)

What a perfect description of what happened to Cynthia's group! The city may have hijacked the intended schedule of events, but when such a powerful key lesson comes along, we must stop and take full advantage of the moment.

When some people hear stories like this, especially parents, they start to wonder if the city isn't perhaps a bit too real, too uncontrollable, to serve as a good or even responsible environment for a young person's education. It is true that there is an element of anarchy and real danger in the city, but these things are everywhere in the real world, and it is this real world our young people are about to enter, unguarded. Dr. Montessori had little children in mind when she said, "Let us take the child out to show him real things instead of making objects which represent ideas and closing them in cupboards" (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 18), but the adolescent has even more

to gain by this advice. If anything, the hazardous nature of city life makes it more imperative that we get our young people out into the world, in fail-safe mode, so they can learn from mistakes without getting actually hurt. It is a practical matter of survival. And I think we have a moral obligation as well, caught up nicely by John Long in a discussion of key experiences for the adolescent, “[adolescents] need to see what the young Buddha saw when he went into the city for the first time. They need to encounter sickness, old age, even death” (65). To shield them would be to deny them the entire view of the human condition. They are ready for reality! The city needs to be experienced and appreciated because of, not in spite of, its, grit, its danger, its confusion, its creeps, its criminals, its corrupt politicians, and its idiots. Real life includes all of these things and more. Making mistakes, being scared, feeling threatened, these are things we naturally seek to avoid, but in the course of a genuine life we can’t. The young person in the city needs to be ready for the dark side, and so it is critical that they have experience with it in the course of their education. For parents and educators who remain unconvinced, I refer them to *Free-Range Children*, a light but persuasive book by Lenore Skenazy, called “the worst mother in the world” for letting her pre-teen kids ride the New York subway on their own. In it she essentially wages a war on fear, and as far as I am concerned, fear loses.

The city model offers nearly endless opportunities for real work in socialization for the third-plane person. However, finding those opportunities requires a willingness to set aside a literal interpretation of the farm school model and look for the same lessons in the city landscape. It is a hunt for metaphors and analogies, and it can be frustrating, but the reality of our students’ lives demands the effort. If the environment is to teach our young people, we must first get them into their environment. Do not worry about the hazards and the grit, because that is real life, and these young people are ready to start dealing with it. Do not assume that the city is a mad rush of impenetrable traffic and blank buildings, because it is rich with opportunities for young people who are eager to see what the world holds for them as adults.

Our students are ready; the city is waiting.

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