

NOTES FROM AN EMERGING CULTURE

[Editor's Note: Paul Epstein, Doctoral Candidate in Anthropology at S.U.N.Y. - Buffalo, writes about the beginning stage of his dissertation research on adolescence, while teaching anthropology to junior high and high school students at Washington's first Montessori high school.]

Fifteen students and I gather in a hallway of the Washington Area Montessori High School. Some students are angry, some curious, others just seem bored. I am nervous and embarrassed. The students demand that I tell them why I have collected their notes and why I have invaded their privacy.

I am a note collector. Notes are written by students and pass directly between friends. Notes are also passed by student messengers who promise not to read the note but who invariably do. When confronted for this breach of promise, the messenger swears his or her innocence. The author of the note then declares, "I don't care." At the Montessori High School, "I don't care" is a frequently heard utterance with multiple meanings that I am seeking to understand.

I am not a note messenger. I am a note collector. During the student's interrogation, I explain my actions. I am their anthropology and history teacher, but I am also a Cultural Anthropologist collecting information for my doctoral dissertation on adolescence. Notes are a primary device of communication used by adolescents within our culture for communication and enactment of their culture. I explain to the students that I must pay close attention to all behaviors I observe between students, their parents, teachers, and counsellors. I view these behaviors, including "note passing", as interactions which give meaning and reality to what adolescence is in our society.

Rules at a Montessori High School

The students' concerns over their privacy are of particular concern to me because I am a teacher trained in the



pedagogical approach of Maria Montessori, and am presently working with fourteen other adults to create the nation's first Montessori High School here in a suburb of the nation's capital. The school, with a co-educational enrollment of 120 seventh through twelve graders, seeks to incorporate Montessori's mandate for reforming adolescent education: establish programs which encourage students to become economically and psychologically independent of their parents, and instill a sense of belonging to a large community. Together these principles should accomplish a "Valorization of Personality" or a process through which each adolescent knows that he or she is capable of succeeding in life by his or her own efforts.

Each student upon admission to this High School agrees to follow basic ground rules to ensure personal safety, promote trust, and permit honest, truthful communication. The fifteen students confronting me about their notes speak openly and honestly. I apologize to them as they believe I

have invaded their privacy. I explain that I found their notes on counters, floors and desks shared by all students in the classrooms where I teach. I promise I will never reveal my sources, that I will meet privately with each note's author to ask permission to use the note and also will ask for his/her interpretation of the contents of each note. The meeting with them ends when one student declares loudly "I don't care. No one will ever know who wrote this stuff. He'll change all the names anyhow."

But I care. Anthropologists have a knack for taking the mundane "I don't care" -- a common, everyday occurrence -- and transforming it into significant data. "I don't care" may be a clue to the existence of some cultural rules unknown to me. At this school, cultural rules are important because we are creating a Montessori high school where cultural rules are established which can be shared by teachers and students alike. At a Montessori high school, students are supposed to be involved with the school's daily administration, with setting and enforcing the ground rules. Input from students is solicited, even about the hiring of new faculty and the admission of new students.

Ideally in a Montessori high school, there should be a single culture shared by faculty and students. In principle, there would not be a separate adolescent culture. For example, in this shared culture, classrooms would be open: students would freely enter these classrooms to work with friends, collect assignments, and confer with teachers. All involved should together share tacit rules with which to jointly conduct these behaviors.

Notes in Two Cultures

Instead, I have often observed two cultures in existence side by side. One I call the "Emerging Montessori Culture". People within the school know this as the larger group of faculty and students struggling to instill Montessori principles. But a second culture,

a group of other students, have a separate set of rules. Members of this second group enter classrooms at will but proceed to interrupt and disturb those at work. During the school year, some of these students have even occasionally formed a third more aggressive group, agreeing to actively war against assimilation into the "Emerging Montessori Culture" by breaking computers, tearing carpeting, damaging restroom facilities, and cutting out of school.

The lines of classification between these two cultural groups are not firmly drawn. Every two or three weeks some students from the "Emerging Montessori Culture" switch sides, roam hallways, and enter and disrupt classrooms.

Notes are the primary communication device with which students construct these two cultural groups and by which they switch from one culture to the other. Notes are written between rule sharing friends. These rules permit "friends" to similarly classify information and thereby share interpretations and understandings for the meaning of behaviors.

Notes supply two critical functions in the students' on-going construction of their culture. First, notes confirm cultural membership between the author and those reading the note. At one point a group of students within the "Emerging Montessori Culture" had classified themselves as family members. Their notes were addressed to "Dear Mom" and signed "your daughter". A note might contain, "You shouldn't like ____, I hate ____". The note indicates who is in the culture, and it suggests that someone should not be included. Frequently, notes are passed with the admonition, "Don't let ____ see this!" One interpretation of this

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note is that the author has expressed anger. However, an important interpretive variant is that this note could be teasing. My 15 interrogators warned me, "Unless you're in the situation, you can get it wrong." You're "in" -- you've confirmed your membership into this culture -- when you know how to apply the correct interpretative rules. Notes serve a second purpose -- the inclusion of new members; for example, "I like ___, do you?" During the family affair, notes ran like this: "I like ___. Let's adopt him (or her)".

An important kind of adoption takes place after some three or four weeks: a girl is asked by a boy to go with him. "Going with someone" is a public declaration that you like the person. There is a flurry of note-passing activity prior to his asking and after she says yes. During this cycle, those students involved leave the "Emerging Montessori Culture" and switch sides, joining the other culture of students who enter and disturb classroom work.

"Going with someone" is an involving piece of cultural work. It is more than a boy asking a girl. Most usually, it is the girl who initially wants to go with the boy. She won't however, just ask him out; this is regarded as tacky and cheap. Instead, she tells her girl friends that she "kinda likes him". The note-passing network is now jammed with this news. The messengers involved enter and disturb other classrooms while passing notes. Thus the second culture, like the first, is defined and encouraged through this ritual of note-passing.

The girl's friends begin to "bug him". Karen wants to go with Sam; Karen's girl friends "bug him" by asking, "Do you like Karen? Why not?" After some days of this, everyone knows Karen likes Sam. Eventually, Sam does ask Karen to go with him. Usually, according to my informants, he does this because he is

tired of being bugged. Later, when they break up, the grounds for divorce are that he never really liked her to begin with -- he only asked her because he was bugged. Cultural lines of membership are re-drawn; the ranks of the "Emerging Montessori Culture" again swell, and active disruptive note-passing declines.

The anthropological study of an emerging culture is fascinating work, fully compatible with my activities as a "resident anthropologist" and Montessori teacher for whom observation is always a primary activity. Maria Montessori encouraged teachers to design environments for learning that would incorporate the activities and interests of the students. As I share my observations with teachers and students, and they share theirs, a culture is slowly emerging. We seek the design of human and physical environments that support the process through which adolescents valorize their personality, the process through which a student comes to succeed in life through his or her own autonomous decisions.

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