

CONCEPTIONS OF “ADOLESCENCE” ACROSS  
MAJOR INTELLECTUAL DOMAINS &  
IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE SCHOOLING

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## Abstract

CHARLOTTE R. STEWART: Conceptions of “Adolescence” across Major Intellectual Domains & Implications for Transformative Education  
(Under the direction of Lynda Stone)

This paper explores the concept of adolescence and its pertinence to identity, as conceived in several fields, including history, psychology, biology, anthropology, and sociology in an effort to elucidate the origins of adult pre-conceptions about young people at this age. This exploration includes discussion of youth advocacy and the legal & moral perspective on adolescence, which in turn challenge and partake of many of these notions. The thesis posits that educators who recognize and understand their own misconceptions about adolescents will be better able to cooperate with students to ascertain and meet educational needs and wants.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is an exploration into the various sources of the meanings of “adolescence.” It does not represent an exhaustive review of extant literature on the concept; rather, this thesis should be considered a snapshot of how adolescence is conceived in different fields. The schema suggested contains two possible conceptions of adolescence, which can be illustrated with an analogy from the art world. An artistic composition consists of positive space, which is occupied by forms and images, and negative space, which is vacant of meaningful content. What I term a *positive* conception necessarily asserts some characteristic that is particular to adolescence. Negative conceptions of adolescence are void of any defining characteristics, indicating that the term “adolescent” is not a meaningful category of identity. A negative conception assumes only two possibilities for age-related identity, that one is either a child or an adult. Whether a particular domain holds a positive or negative view is significant. If adolescents represent a discrete, identifiable group of people possessing special characteristics particular to them, as a positive conception would indicate, then they require different kinds of attentions, engagement, and interaction. They would have special needs and wants that could then be recognized by educators.

Education occurs all the time, everywhere, whether or not one intends or plans for it to do so, whether or not there is a certified teacher present, whether or not there is a school building, whether or not there is an imminent multiple-choice test. Unfortunately, educative moments can easily pass one by, if she is lacking in opportunities for reflection on them. One source for such reflections is a collection of essays titled *The Teacher's Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy*, in which educators engage with the significance of their bodies in the classroom context. What emerges is a clear *insignificance* of the teacher's body, which indicates to scholar Madeleine Grumet, who studies the ways students' and teachers' experiences affect what happens in the classroom, a troubling effacement of teacher subjectivity (Grumet in Freedman & Holmes, 2003, p. 251). Reflections by various teachers on how pregnancy, sexual orientation, dwarfism, disability, and other features of corporeality affect their teaching show that schools are not utilized as spaces for specific interpersonal interaction as sources of educative moments, much less critical reflection on them. With this awareness, teachers can choose to initiate these kinds of interactions. Freedman and Holmes only addressed the aspect of teacher identity; students, too, must be allowed to take advantage of this social context for exploring their own goals and identities.

There is one resource teachers and schools can offer to their students that they might not receive otherwise: an environment capable of provoking and fostering critical reflection, a crucial step towards implementing a transformative education. I am borrowing the term from an extant corpus of literature on transformative education; by *transformative*, I mean an education that has the capacity to help students develop the tools and insights necessary to determine a better quality of human life for themselves

and their communities. I call the process of developing transformative education within the existing institution of school *transformative schooling*.

My notion of transformative schooling includes increased curricular choice for students, more opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions, development of their own educative functions through tutoring and collaborative learning, and discussions of issues in their lives that matter to them. Fundamentally, these features signify a profound respect for the students' identities. Unfortunately, just as the teacher's body can be ignored, no matter its potential for eliciting educative moments, so can student identities be rendered invisible by teachers. Thus, for a transformative educator to be effective, he or she must learn to recognize and value students as people, even though they may not have attained adult status. In fact, this thesis deals with age, specifically the adolescent years, as a significant aspect of student identity, with which transformative educators must engage in order to foster confidence and self-reflection in their students.

People who are fortunate enough to avoid illness or fatal injury until several decades into adulthood pass through the various stages of age, experiencing facets of human existence such as autonomy, kinship, and sexuality differently from one stage to the next. Thus, excepting its fluidity, age is a category of identity much like race, class, or gender. Michael Nakkula, a research associate at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, suggests that age attains particular salience to student identity during the adolescent years, and to better understand the educational needs of students at this age, it is necessary to draw upon many fields of knowledge offering explanations and insights into what it means to be an adolescent (Nakkula, 2003, p. 2).

Specifically, Nakkula seeks to marry educational theory with psychology in order to better address real-world concerns of adolescents. My own understanding of “adolescence,” while it continues to be influenced by my life experiences, is indeed increasingly transformed as I encounter relevant literature in various fields. Therefore, any general conclusions I have drawn thus far should be considered subject to emendation; that said, I continue to believe that young people do not receive the care or justice they deserve, even when in the care of well-meaning adults. I do not believe that the majority of blunders committed by adults towards adolescents are the result either of malicious intent or willful neglect; rather, misunderstandings occur because adults have difficulty seeing adolescents, particularly other people’s children, as *people* with particular talents, preferences, quirks, and habits. Thus, my view of adolescence is one of advocacy for youth rights, including a greater respect for their ability to reason morally, make responsible choices, and to learn from and teach one another. This view is informed by several scholars working to debunk harmful myths about teenagers, adolescents, and youth perpetrated by parties whose interests do not lie in the protection or promotion of youth. Again, all those who do not partake of this youth rights agenda are not necessarily out-right oppressors; there are pervasive myths in society about youth that make up general cultural attitudes and beliefs. These may have significant consequences on teachers’ ability to provide youth meaningful educational experiences. Specifically, I believe that students’ lives and experiences should form the curricula to a large extent. My vision of transformative education necessarily takes into account the needs and desires of the young people under its auspices. From this thesis and its source, a review of received notions about what it means to be an adolescent will allow educators

to evaluate their own prejudices and assumptions, and then to begin establishing authentic relationships with their adolescent students. An authentic relationship is established between people when they have discovered and examined their preconceptions about the other and gotten to know the person rather than the image. That is, a teacher who has an authentic relationship with her students will know more about Keisha, Yumi, Kelly, DeMarcus, Jesus, Madison, Scott, and Antonio than their gender, age, or race; she will know their aspirations, fears, families, friends, pet peeves, and special talents.

Influencing my vision is Nancy Lesko's book *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, which offers a chronological view of the development of the concept of adolescence and situates this process alongside economic and political developments in the history of the United States. Her work demonstrates how the widespread construction of adolescents as problems to be addressed through social institutions arose and leads to contemporary understandings of teenagers, adolescents, and youth as "troubled'... alienated... violent... predatory... criminals... sexualized," as critical education researcher Michael W. Apple says in the book's preface (Lesko, 2001, p. xi). The thesis draws heavily on Lesko's model, in that I, too, am interested in the origins of the ways society talks and, presumably, thinks about youth. My work is less chronological, seeking to draw together more or less contemporary voices from various fields of biology, psychology, anthropology, and education, in order to generate an initial synchronic view of how educators (or anyone) today may form inaccurate and harmful preconceptions about young people. Also, I specifically address the potential for teachers



to avert some of this harm by rectifying their own received views through awareness and reflection.

Why should examining the concept of adolescence interest educators? According to sociologist Karen Sternheimer, whose research interests are pop culture and youth, “[p]ublic policy decisions are regularly made based on misperceptions about young people” (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 153). Generally speaking, problems of youth are given attention more often as justifications for increased adult control rather than as problems needing solutions. Returning, Lesko points out that “[t]ypically teenagers appear in our cultural talk as synonymous with crazed hormones, as delinquents, as deficiencies, or clowns, that is, beings not to be taken too seriously” (Lesko, 2001, p. 1). These attitudes are pervasive enough to permeate the public school classroom, and ingrained enough to be insidious. The generally age-based grouping of children into grades has made age-related facets of their lives almost invisible to movements wanting to close achievement gaps based on race, gender, or other social factors. Classmates tend to share at least the characteristic of a certain narrow age-range, which is generally ignored as a potential source of variation in individual performance. Of course, any class of children of roughly the same age will vary greatly in physical shape and size. These traits also instill unconscious expectations in others, whether favorable, such as athletic ability, self-discipline, and confidence, or unfavorable, such as awkwardness, incompetence, and indecisiveness.

To consider what teacher attitudes about adolescents might be, which is a prior step to assessing their potential effects, it is necessary to explore the socio-historical origins of the concept of adolescence and then elucidate conceptions currently operating

in the larger societal realm. These conceptions will be described in Part I and then set against current scholarship on youth from an anthropological perspective in Part II. Advocacy from a youth rights as well as a moral perspective also will be explored in this section, along with the legal view of youth. Classroom teachers and other educators seeking to promote fruitful relationships of respect and trust with adolescents would do well to understand these areas. Overall, these areas of scholarship provide critical insights that challenge the harmful myths about adolescence that intellectual domains sustain. These insights will be discussed in Part III. Given that this thesis is an initial exploration, each section concludes with a statement on contributions and limitations of each domain, because, while snapshots always tell something, they also leave something out.

Across the thesis, I use the terms “youth” and “adolescent” interchangeably; the term “teenager” should be understood to mean a young person between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, inclusive. I have drawn upon a wide range of sources, which used the term “adolescent” to indicate variously someone from ten years of age to eighteen, from ten to twenty-five, from twelve to nineteen, and so on. Therefore, I will use the term to indicate anyone from ten years of age to twenty-six, unless specifically stated otherwise.

To repeat, my general purpose is to expose prevalent assumptions about young people so that educators can engage students as people rather than abstract bodies in taken-for-granted states of hormonal distress. When understood, it should become easier for teachers to accurately ascertain and then meet students’ educational needs and wants.

## CHAPTER 2

### Describing Major Notions of Adolescence

Contemporary conceptions of adolescence originate in several intellectual domains. Socio-historical, psychological, and biological research each yield differing justifications for two broad, semi-conflicting notions of adolescence extant in society. There are two main orientations for the views within each of these domains on what it means for someone to be a *teenager*, *youth*, or *adolescent*, according to those in authority, namely, adults. The first orientation confers unfavorable attributes on this age group, for instance, that adolescents are irrational, temperamental, and incapable of “adult responsibility.” The second contains what are ostensibly favorable views of adolescents, that they are growing, exploring, or “coming-into-being;” interestingly, these latter views tend to be romanticizations, fictions, or, to use Lesko’s word, *homiletic*. Homiletic views on adolescents, while seemingly favorable to youth, in fact lend force to adult perspectives and delegitimize the experiences of youth. Two major points should be kept in mind when working with the framework of these two orientations. First, different domains, such as biology, history, and psychology, may possess views of either orientation or both. Further, the same body of knowledge can be the source of both positive and negative views of adolescence. Second, to repeat from above, views on adolescence will be labeled as either positive, meaning that adolescence is a phenomenon recognized by the attribution of some traits, or negative, meaning that it can be defined only by the lack of a trait. Said trait may be favorable, unfavorable, or neutral; for

example, the law maintains a negative perspective on adolescence, viewing an adolescent as “not-child” and “not-adult.” It does not attribute to it any particular characteristics as uniquely pertinent. Consequently, it must choose to treat individuals as *either* child or adult, as will be discussed below. It is important to note that the positive or negative attribution of traits to youth comes *from the top down*; that is, these traits are constructed and imposed by adults, and, not surprisingly, tend to serve adult interests. Indeed, it is likely that any current adult’s notions were in part received and cemented during his own adolescent years. Young people themselves may subscribe to these views, as they are institutionally pervasive via media, schools, businesses, other social organizations, and the law.

### *Socio-Historical Notions*

A first set of notions provides the origin of adolescence as a concept. Alice Schlegel is an anthropologist whose research focuses on gender, adolescence, and the evolution of human social organization. Her work incorporates a historical perspective of the development of the adolescent’s place in American society. Thomas Gullotta has written and edited numerous books and articles about issues facing youth, including violence, health care, substance misuse, and sexuality, with a focus on problem prevention. Together, their research reveals the prevailing notion that the origins of adolescence in America are a result of the rise of industrial society, with roots in economic developments of western civilization (Gullotta, 1983, p. 151; Schlegel, 1995 p. 15). While an agricultural economy employs many helping hands, as profits are a combined result of seasonal influences and strength of available labor force, industrial

society provides wages only to those who can find a spot in the factory-line; owners and managers stand to benefit by hiring few people for the lowest wages possible. As the economy of America shifts from agricultural to primarily industrial, adolescents working in factories become *threatened by* long hours, dangerous work, little care, and even less pay, while at the same time also become *threatening to* adult workers, whose wages are undercut by the availability and expendability of young workers. The perception of this threat provides the impetus for the enforcement of adult authority. Therefore, in the midst of economic changes that benefit those who can find work in a primarily industrial society, members of that society begin to redefine what work is and who should be allowed to do it. Thus is one notion of adolescence formed: an adolescent is not qualified for adult status as a worker, but, being older, he also cannot partake of the privileges of childhood. This change in status from adult wage-earner to non-worker represents a negation of identity, in that an individual who is too young to work and too old to play is neither adult nor child. Further, there is a clear “top down” origin for one aspect of adolescent identity, relating to this right to work. As Lesko puts this, “[a]dolescence was created and democratized... when child labor laws, industrialization, and union organizing gutted apprenticeships, which had been the traditional way for youth to move from dependency to independence” (Lesko, 2001, p. 7).

The elimination of the need for apprenticeship-education not only affected young people’s access to education in skilled labor, it also granted adults the opportunity to “pull away from” youth (Gullotta, 1983, p. 151). In the new economy, parents and caregivers are the only ones allowed to earn a living. Therefore the work of adults takes priority over that of youth. What is being threatened and thus protected via adult

intervention is the potential status of the individual as an acceptable adult. Rather than extending childhood status into the teenage years, the privileges of childhood are denied, allowing adults to retain resources of time and attention that would otherwise necessarily be given over to care of a child. Simultaneously, the ability to garner resources of one's own is denied until "full" adulthood is reached. Even today, youth are considered economically viable as a group, not in their capacity for earning wages<sup>1</sup> but their consumerism. Thus, according to professor of family studies Jay Schvaneveldt and his colleague Gerald Adams, professor of family relations and human development, adolescence is a "holding period for society" that has grown from the top down to fill the void of adult alienation from youth (Schvaneveldt & Adams, 1983, p. 98.) Indeed, developmental psychology researchers John Coleman and Leo Hendry assert that "entry into the labour market takes longer, and occurs at a later date than was the case ten or twenty years ago. This also means that young people remain in the parental home for a longer period, frequently continuing to be economically dependent until they are in their twenties" (Coleman & Hendry, 1999, p. 8). As this trend of delayed complete withdrawal continues, so does society's conception of the upward boundary for the age of an adolescent rise.

Adolescence so far has been described in negative terms, that is, as "not-child" and "not-adult;" however, current conceptions posit characteristics as more or less uniquely ascribed to this age group. Contemporary views of the industrial shift provide a view of the adolescent years as an opportunity for young people to reflect on who they are, in terms of their skills, interests, and future desires (Nakkula, 2003, p. 11).

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<sup>1</sup> Most teenager jobs today are "under the table," that is, they are paid in cash so that no work permit or tax liability is incurred by either employer or employee (Schlosser, 2003, throughout).

Sternheimer points out that “[k]ids living in industrial nations... have fewer economic responsibilities...and are largely expected to remain outside the labor force until eighteen, twenty-one, or even older. This... has created an atmosphere of leisure for the young” (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 140).

Historically, too, this extra time allows expanded opportunity and demand for public education, an institution that arose in industrial nations as factory labor increasingly became unavailable to younger people. One result is that the idea of a culture of youth became possible, and schools provided a context in which this new group of people could develop a shared discourse and identity. The ascription of the concept of “youth culture” to adolescents grants them status as an identifiable group, and is thus one aspect of a positive conception of adolescence. Uniquely attributed to adolescence is the increasing importance of a young person’s “peer group,” a term which never existed while the master-apprentice relationship was predominant, and which grows as the gap between youth and adult continues to widen (Gullotta, p. 152, 1983). Schlegel reasons that this trend results from the fact that “[s]chools put adolescents in a peer context for most of their days, reducing the amount of time they spend with adults and increasing the salience of their involvement with age-mates” (Schlegel, 1995, p. 29). Recognition of adolescence as a discrete social category is bolstered by psychological and biological study seeking to develop a positive view of adolescence, that there are unique physical and mental attributes associated with someone between the ages of ten and twenty-six.

### *Psychological and Biological Notions*

A second set of notions begins to arise around the time of industrialization. Psychology has dealt with the concept of adolescence since the early nineteenth century, when psychologist and educator Granville Stanley Hall published his seminal two-volume text, *Adolescence: its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. This work was intended to draw together multiple areas of science into a unified epistemology, which could then tackle questions regarding the nature and development of the human soul (Hall, 1904, v.1, p. v; Hall, 1904, v.2, p. 40-41). Hall was heavily influenced by the intellectual fallout of Darwin's theory of natural selection, which included speculations on eugenics and the status of "savages" as "children and adolescents of mature years," (Hall, 1904, v.2, p. 51). Hall also expresses early, if not the first, notions of adolescence as a time of transition, which, according to schema of human development as an evolutionary analogue, mirrors an evolutionary stage during which "man became man" (Hall, 1904, v.2, p. 52). This work is credited with initiating studies of "adolescence" as a discrete phase of development, and has remained highly influential; even today, the domain of psychology considers adolescence primarily as a transitional phase during which children move along a spectrum of physical, moral, and cognitive development towards adulthood. An example is the research on identity formation by psychologist Sally Archer, particularly areas of conflict in different identity domains. She describes the process adolescents undergo as understood in the mid-twentieth century: During this time, they develop their own identities, based on patterns of rational decision-making and (supposedly) increasing independence of family influence (Archer, 1982, p. 1552). Inherent in psychology's



transitional model are implications of progress. Underlying any notion of progress is the assumption that the end is desirable; in this case, an individual undergoes adolescence as a process of becoming a fully-fledged adult. Adulthood, of course, is the desired end of adolescence.

While Hall initiated the study of adolescents as necessarily different from adults or children, the bulk of identity formation theory about adolescence comes from psychologist Erik Erikson's work in the mid-twentieth century. He developed a model of identity formation, known as the "Eight Stages of Man," as a process of making choices about personal goals and values by accumulating experience, in light of which previous choices are re-examined and alternatives explored before a final commitment is made (Erikson, 1950, pp. 219-234). Erikson's model continues to promote the conception of adolescence as an in-between time, during which the child negotiates between extremes to develop into adulthood. This process comprises four stages; they are, in order, *identity diffusion*, *foreclosure*, *moratorium*, and *identity achievement*. Individuals who have reached the fourth stage "have made a commitment..." (Archer, 1982, p. 1552). As Archer explains, they have questioned alternatives and have selected the one which they believe fits their individuality best at the present time and in the context of their anticipated future" (ibid.). They make commitments to such things as career choice, religious beliefs, sex-role preferences, and political philosophies.

As a consequence of these commitments, adolescence becomes defined as the "promise of individual or collective regeneration," of "always becoming" (Lesko, 2001, p. 110), a concept which strongly privileges adult authority. In general, psychology has a positive concept of adolescence, because it asserts a special developmental process

unique to that group; however, this concept places youth on a continuum of identity between the extremes of childhood and adulthood. However, the concept posits only transition as a unique characteristic of adolescents as opposed to other age groups. The result is that youth are considered incomplete or not fully-realized individuals until they have progressed to the adult end of this spectrum. They are thus considered incapable of major decision-making, which remains under the auspices of adult rationality.

Out of psychology, the significance of a positive conception of adolescent identity is the recognition of special needs and rights; however, the view of adolescents as merely nascent adults results in a gradual conferment of adult rights on them as a function of age, or, in other words, their proximity to imminent adulthood. Further, to reach the stage of identity achievement requires “sophisticated cognitive skills” and a lessening of family ties, pointing to justified adult withdrawal from their children during this phase (Archer, 1982, p. 1552). This sentiment seems tied to a particularly Western notion of promoting individual identity over a collectively-defined one. Interestingly, the “individual” is said to have successfully negotiated the crises of Eriksonian adolescence when he has tamed his innate (individual) impulses to conform to what society deems acceptable.

Another source, Brian K. Barber, a professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, studies adolescent development in social context. He asserts that adolescents eager to attain the rights and privileges of adult status (economic opportunities, sexual and vocational freedom) “may be particularly susceptible to excessive psychological control or insufficient behavioral regulation, because of the developmental tasks associated with this stage of the life course” (Barber, 1992, p. 71).

The stress adolescents seem to typically undergo in the course of their development may result from the tensions between their particular needs and society's expectations.

Closely associated with the psychology of adolescence is a biological or medical perspective, which purports to answer questions such as whether adolescence is more than a time of "storm and stress," or whether adolescents are necessarily violent, awkward, emotional, confused, or in pain. In other words, biology can affirm or negate the most prevalent positive conception of adolescents, which consists mainly of the aforementioned unfavorable traits, and which is believed to have hormonal roots. As Lesko puts this generally, "[t]he natural view of adolescence that grounds most of psychology, medicine, and policy-making assumes that young people between the ages of 12 and 18 have naturally occurring, largely biologically generated characteristics, behaviors, and needs<sup>2</sup>" (Lesko, 2001, p. 7) This biological view of adolescence is a-historical, in that it holds what is true of humans between the ages of twelve and eighteen years today to be the same as what was true of those humans who were between twelve and eighteen one hundred, one thousand, and ten thousand years ago, at least, biologically-speaking. A biological model of adolescence could conceivably determine necessary aspects of adolescence that are not subject to societal factors; however, for this very reason, the model has limited utility.

Research on cognition by scholars such as Raleigh Philp has the potential to fill in gaps in knowledge of the biological features of adolescence, as well as the psychological

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<sup>2</sup> This view is not strictly borne out in all realms of medicine. Look in your medicine cabinet. Carefully read the labels of the over-the-counter pain relievers, sleep aids, or decongestants. Note that the "child" dosage typically does not apply after age 12. Physiologically, the 12 year-old body has matured to an adult state, so far as its metabolic capacity for pharmaceuticals (of course, the "adult" dose is often labeled as intended for "Adults *and* children 12 years and older," emphasis mine.)

consequences of the interactions of the biological with the social aspects. The chapter entitled “Stress and the Brain-Body Connection” in Philp’s work on how to engage people from 10-13 concludes with an activity called “Helping Students Deal with Stress.” It asks teachers to “provide good advice to students who show signs of chronic stress” (Philp, 2007, p. 122). Interestingly, none of this advice mentions altering any aspect of the school environment, even one under the teacher’s control (such as the amount of homework or high-stress format of tests). All of the proposed solutions involve asking the student to change her habits and priorities outside the school environment, presumably so that the immutable stress of schooling will have less of a negative effect. The eminent priority of school remains unquestioned.

Schlegel also makes a biological connection with adolescence as a concept. She refers to a period in the human life cycle “between childhood and adulthood during which its participants behave and are treated differently than [sic] either their seniors or their juniors” (Schlegel, 1995, p. 16). She draws her data from the “Standard Cross-Cultural Sample,” which is a tool used in cross-cultural research consisting of data from 186 well-documented cultures<sup>3</sup>. Thus, there is something that could be called “adolescence” in multiple cultures. What Schlegel is interested in is how many and which of its assumed attributes are shared among American adolescents and their cross-cultural counterparts. For example, when considered in primarily reproductive terms, the time period of girls’ adolescence is much shorter than that of boys: “full social adulthood is almost everywhere associated with the married state, social adolescence across cultures can best be viewed as a time of preparation for marriage” (Schlegel, 1995, p. 16.) Girls in traditional cultures are deemed fit for marriage at or shortly after menarche. Boys,

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standard\\_cross-cultural\\_sample](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standard_cross-cultural_sample)

however, do not possess the wealth or status to provide for a family as a man must; their adolescence is a time between becoming biologically capable of inseminating a woman and becoming socially capable of financing a family. Out of their biology, they must attain physical strength and social status before being acceptable as mates (or sons-in-law); therefore they marry older, and a ten to twelve year age gap between spouses is common (Schlegel, 1995, p. 28). In sum, for males in traditional cultures, adolescence is a time of “growing into manhood” through deeds and rituals, while females do not require the expenditure of mental and physical effort to prove themselves worthy of a mate. Their fertile status assured, the status of “womanhood” is conferred on them by the vagaries of physiological development.

Finally, as gender is an aspect of identity that lies at the intersection of biology and psychology, perspectives on adolescence from researchers Wayne Martino and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli have focused on gender issues in the social context of schooling, such as masculinity and homophobia in Martino’s case and social diversity in health and education in Pallotta-Chiarolli’s. To become adult is to gradually acquire those characteristics which are promoted in institutions like schools, such as compulsory heterosexuality, which is promoted through traditions such as electing a prom king and queen. And yet, some “adult” characteristics that are encouraged by the institution, such as obedience and subordination, are in a way more childlike than rebelliousness or iconoclasm. Could rebellion by adolescence be viewed as an adult-like act, demonstrating freedom and independence, even if it is viewed by some adults as irresponsible, dangerous, and incomprehensible? If promotion of an individual’s capacity for decision-making and agenda-setting are the hallmarks of adulthood, should some

form of “rebellion” not be encouraged, even celebrated (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005)? In fact, there are scholars and activists working to promote the rights of youth against the preconceptions about their need for contradictory policing and withdrawal policies adults tend to adopt.

To conclude this section, a brief word on the limitations of these views is in order. While socio-historical, psychological, and biological views on adolescence provide insights useful for understanding its conceptual provenance, by largely ignoring individual experiences of adolescents themselves, they possess a tendency to essentialize adolescent experience in a way that limits the potential for addressing harm.

## CHAPTER 3

### Responding to Major Notions of Adolescence

To review, there are several basic conceptions of what it means for someone to undergo adolescence: An “adolescent” is someone neither child nor adult, but something in-between. The construct originally arose from primarily socio-economic reasons but is reinforced by psychology. Contemporary views also attach an economic imperative to adulthood; that is, a person is not considered an adult if he or she is living at home with parents, even if the decision is economically justified to all parties.

#### *Anthropological Perspective*

One domain which could successfully challenge both Erikson’s model and the economic construction of adolescence is from an anthropological/cross-cultural perspective. As indicated in the previous chapter, Schlegel has examined whether something like “adolescence” is present in pre-industrial societies, and significantly in other primate species, to promote a *biosocial* construction of adolescence that is more or less universal among humans (and/or primates, as the case may be.)

Viewed through Schlegel’s research, Erikson’s model of identity formation becomes increasingly spurious on cultural grounds, as he relies on a definition of identity formation as the individual construction of a template for decision-making that should closely conform to societal norms. The materials of this template are beliefs and values, political dispositions, and vocation. Some societies, which value collective identity over individual identity, will present a much different process, as a youth will most likely

acclimatize himself to the values of the society as a whole. Additionally, other cultures may not allow vocational choice, either by tradition or economic necessity. Furthermore, Erikson proposed that identity formation for males and females is different, because the crisis for females comes at incipient motherhood (Erikson, 1950, p. 279). The 1982 study by Archer indicates that this is a false distinction. It also indicates an inverse relationship of identity achievement by age and parental socioeconomic status and educational attainment level, suggesting that there may be more flexibility in considering vocation and other goals where economic pressures are less. Moreover, the freedom implied by Erikson is not available to all of humanity, thus the salience of his model seems limited to wealthy western societies, where economic opportunities abound.

### *Youth Rights Perspective*

Sociology has uncovered instances where “teenagers” as a social group are deliberately misrepresented in the media to serve adult agendas. Specifically, according to Mike Males, the media has sensationalized and exaggerated the degree of “danger” from youth; everything from drug use to gang activity is given more press and a higher profile than the ever-worsening trends in the middle-aged population. Males asserts that the sudden prominence beginning in the 1970s of teenage drinking as an issue in the public sphere coincides with the creation of myriad organizations, agencies, and programs, all having the ostensible goal of promoting youth welfare, which needed funding, and therefore a problem to solve. He asserts,

in the 1970s, for the first time in any country or in any time in history, at a time when teenage drunkenness arrests and traffic accidents were decreasing, the apocalyptic perils of ‘teenage drinking’ were suddenly discovered in the U.S. The foundations of today’s anti-teen-drinking crusade are not logic, science, teenage



safety, or responsibility with alcohol... but the needs of the modern adult to which adolescents have proven useful. (Males, 1996, p. 197)

Included in his work are statistics indicating that “[w]hile teenagers hog the media and presidential attention, *adults* are committing 90 percent of the intoxicated motorway damage” (Males, 1996, pp. 201-202; emphasis mine.)

Similarly, Sternheimer, whose work in sociology specializes in youth, points to the manufactured crisis of school violence: “[p]rior to 1994 ...serious violent crime rates in schools remained low and relatively constant. Nonetheless, levels of fear rose, in large part because of ominous-sounding news reports.” This increase in fear contributed to the idea that “young people and the schools they attend are out of control, not to be trusted, and in need of a major crackdown” (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 61). Lesko elaborates that adolescents have had a significant role in adult schemes since the 1900s, when an adult society in love with Social Darwinism imposed upon white male youth the imperative to maintain supremacy over women and savages. Sternheimer concurs with an added principle: “[t]imes of flux and change create generalized uncertainty, and young people symbolize that uncertainty about the future” (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 140; Lesko, 2001, pp. 49 & 171). Thus, to manage youth is to create an illusion of control over an uncertain future.

Ironically, this desire for improved management of youth does not negate the increasing levels of adult withdrawal from youth as people. Sternheimer contributes the notion that “[b]laming kids means that we think we have found the answers to our problems in individuals who make bad choices, rather than by looking at the complexities of what causes these problems” (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 141). In fact, a lack of engagement is what allows media-driven fears to take hold in place of more favorable

views that would be gained through authentic experiences with adolescents. The reactions of the adult community in the aftermath of an event such as the Columbine Massacre are indicative of adult confusion about how to address the problems of youth. In a moral panic, rather than make issues of bullying more visible, rather than learning a new approach to dealing with adolescents' abuse of one another, school administrations chose to ban the wearing of trench coats, install metal detectors, require see-through book-bags, and adopt zero-tolerance measures which not only would probably have had little preventative effect at Columbine itself, but which created an environment of anxiety and distrust. Such an environment fosters anger and frustrations that can lead to further tragedies.

#### *Legal Perspective*

Males (1996) has also collected data on juvenile crime proving that the criminalization of youth is unwarranted, and furthermore, that the harshness of punishments suffered by youth for legal transgressions is groundless. He notes that the US Supreme Court has "explicitly ruled that policy-makers may impose adult responsibilities and punishments on individual youths as if they were adults at the same time laws and policies abrogate adolescents' rights en masse as if they were children" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolescence>). Roger J. R. Levesque, a professor in the department of criminal justice at Indiana University specializing in youth rights, law, and policy, concurs generally with Males. In his book *Not by Faith Alone*, he explores the role of and society's reaction to religion in adolescents' lives. On adolescents' religious rights and the law, he states that

the law often ignores the many intricacies of this transitional developmental period as it typically classifies adolescents either as children or as adults. In some

contexts, the law finds the religious concerns of adolescents indistinguishable from those of young children, which allows it to subject them to paternalistic policies based on assumptions of dependence, vulnerability, incompetence, inexperience, and immaturity. In other contexts, it treats adolescents' religious concerns as it treats those of fully mature adults, assuming that teens are competent to make decisions, accountable for their choices, and entitled to no special accommodations. (Levesque, 2002, p. 4)

The legal view of adolescence seems on the one hand to be informed largely by Erikson's developmental psychology, in that the law deems adolescents unfit to make decisions about self-regulation, yet punitive actions treat them as adults. It is as if only an adult could commit a murder, rape, or any other felony. The point is that if adolescents are to be credited with adult level reasoning abilities, so too must they possess the capacity for being manipulative, exploitative, and oppressive. After all, bullying and ostracism are perpetrated both physically and psychologically by adolescents on adolescents in many social contexts. However, the legal perspective of adolescent behavior suggests that guilt of heinous acts can only be attributed to one who is more adult, and metes out adult punishments accordingly. The corollary assumption is that *innocence* is a quality of those who are more childlike. Thus, Levesque's view is borne out, that the law does not treat adolescents as transitional beings, but dichotomously as either adult or child, based on the acts they commit. The moral perspective, on the other hand, does partake of a more transitional view, based on the kinds of choices which will confront adolescents as they grow up.

### *The Moral Perspective*

The moral perspective holds that the older children become the more serious and weighty their decisions will be. If a person makes the wrong decision, it is out of ignorance and immaturity, rather than the despicable nature he acquired as he fell from

innocent childhood into the corrupt adult world. One result of adult concern with the moral development of children has been the rise of contemporary “character education,”<sup>4</sup> which simultaneously holds a positive and negative concept of “adolescence.”

The character education movement is intended as a preventative measure against incorrect moral choices made out of ignorance. It attempts to educate the young about virtues and values, and attributes adult qualities of maturity, responsibility, and restraint to those who can make correct moral decisions. An ideal product of this movement would be an adolescent who has taken stances against the corrupting influence of peers (whose influence is considered to be chief rival of adult authority). She would boldly state “I will not take drugs; I will not drop out of school. I will abstain from sexual activity until marriage.” The message of this movement seems to be that a truly responsible, “adult” moral stance is one that firmly maintains one’s childlike innocence.

The moral view of adolescents is positive in that it attributes youth with potential for responsible decision-making, and attempts to put something in place, namely, the ability to reason and act according to the morals and values imparted in the process. It is negative, however, in that it largely denies youth the capacity to independently achieve acceptable moral standards through their own life experiences. Moreover, it does not provide opportunities for guided self-determination, autonomy, and learning from mistakes. It assumes that the evils of the world are lurking just outside the school yard (which, of course, they are, and elsewhere besides) and that as students move beyond the spheres of institutional influence, they will have little or no moral compass without stringent indoctrination, which it purports to achieve while maintaining secular appeal despite its promotion of primarily protestant ideals.

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<sup>4</sup> One’s *character* can be thought of as the moral dimension to one’s self.

The character education movement does offer useful insights into extant views on adolescents; however, this movement differs from the advocacy described above in that it focuses on how adults and educators can instill dominant values and morals within students. This movement has arisen in large part from the belief described above in the necessity of a “holding” time during which youth can grow slowly into maturity as defined by adult dominant society. Adolescents had to be protected from degeneracy and corruption due to immigrant influence. As the nascent inheritors of (Anglo-Saxon) adult traditions and agendas, adolescents therefore had to be molded not only into ideological conformity but moral, intellectual and physical fitness to carry out the mission. Some activities of adolescence which aim to accomplish this task emulate apprenticeships, for example, “driver education, scouts, ROTC... and a host of other activities...,” but rarely are they structured as one-to-one, child-to-adult relationships (Schvaneveldt & Adams, 1983, p. 99). Sternheimer from above points out that “[i]ronically, we are asking kids to learn about the American values of democracy and equality in highly authoritarian settings offering little or no due process” (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 68).

The preconceptions described above lead to the generalized view that adolescents are not fully-formed individuals, because they lack emotional and physical restraint necessary for rational decision-making, ostensibly a core characteristic shared by adults. These conceptions are held by educators and the students themselves, impeding the creation of a positive learning environment. For example, Sternheimer asks, “[w]hy do we associate risk-taking and extreme behavior with young people?” The question is answered in her 2006 book, *Kids These Days*, in which she notes that the bulk of available statistics on condom use, drug abuse, and frequency of drinking were obtained

in studies on youth, rather than adults. The lack of information described above about adults' propensity for risky behavior leads to an unbalanced picture of which group is seen as more rational and in control of themselves. She claims that "...we have been primed to believe that kids these days are out of control," by the fact that "teen research results often make news without the adult context, helping us maintain our assumption that teens are inherent risk-takers and much more trouble than adults" (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 151). Tellingly, Sternheimer also reports that "[i]n a 2001 poll, 59 percent of American respondents said the number-one mission of education should be obedience. This focus on conformity stems from our widespread fear of youth," a sentiment that harkens back to an idea mentioned previously, a perceived necessity to manage youth as a means of controlling an uncertain future (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 67).

While these views call for a focus on the specific experiences of youth, as the views discussed in the previous chapter do not, they are, in fact, being promulgated by adults. In this way, these views will remain limited, so long as the voices of youth themselves are absent.

## CHAPTER 4

### Implications for Schooling

Adolescents live, work, and interact under the auspices of formal education, and are therefore subject to the ministrations of those in authority there (teachers, principals, and coaches, for example) for a significant portion of the adolescent years. As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, teachers and through them the institution of schooling have the capacity to transform the lives and promote the interests of adolescent students. Young people experiencing what is termed “adolescence” deserve “social justice” attention as much as anyone; yet, their vilification is eminently pervasive in American society. With an understanding of extant preconceptions about young people as well as some of the responses, it is time to examine how these factors pertain to adolescents’ school lives. Interestingly, while data from biology on hormone production and cognitive development can be construed to foster views which serve to perpetuate adult dominance, it can also provide compelling research asserting that schools present an environment detrimental to adolescent achievement. By understanding how preconceptions about the needs and temperament of youth have contributed to these antagonistic institutional factors, teachers and students can take the first step towards transforming their schools into nurturing places.

Just as teacher preconceptions of student abilities and social characteristics based on race, class, and gender have been shown to significantly affect students’ performance,

conceivably so could teacher preconceptions of students based on their age render harmful outcomes due to inaccurate impressions of students' capacity for learning. This impression can significantly limit pedagogical opportunities for transformative, critical educative moments, because it undermines the potential for building necessary relationships of *trust* between teacher and students. The students themselves can thrive in an environment where their studies were largely self-directed. Peter Demereth and Jill Lynch conducted a longitudinal study in one suburban area in the United States, concluding that

changes in family structure and parenting style, intensified engagements with electronic and commodity culture, and student-centered pedagogies have ceded young people... significant power to direct their own socialization and education. (Demereth & Lynch, 2008, p. 179)

They go on to assert that “these trends have fostered the production of an authoritative subjectivity... that underlies a habitual disposition to seek to control social experience, including education, in part to allay their anxieties over uncertain futures” (Demereth & Lynch, 2008, p. 180).

On the one hand, while technology and society are providing tools for students' initial forays into self-education and exploration of extracurricular interests, it is not clear that they are capable of providing the kinds of authentic social engagements with those who share different interests. Schools, on the other hand, can indeed provide this (Demereth & Lynch, 2008, pp. 187-188). It is here that transformative educators have a significant role. While increasing autonomy in a caring environment can lead to increased self-confidence, it is crucial that students learn to engage each other *as other*, and to reconcile or otherwise deal with conflicting individual interests. They can also build trusting relationships with each other across class, race, and gender lines, so that



some of the fear about the future can be assuaged by the conviction that, come what may, different people can collaborate for positive change. In this way, they can become prepared to shape their communities with the needs of others, rather than their own, in mind.

In many schools, unfounded fear generated by views of adolescents impedes the ability of an adult to trust students and form mutually respectful and supportive bonds necessary to collaboratively establish a transformative educational environment. As this thesis has indicated, adolescents remain a menagerie of wild beasts in need of the lash (or office referral). One result of this view is that teachers believe they should be *managers* of students; otherwise, were young people left to their own devices, they would invariably become morally disoriented and subject to alien desires and philosophies (Lesko, 2001, p. 96). Specifically and as illustration, Lesko describes the middle school movement as yet another move which ostensibly met the “special needs of young adolescents,” yet the actual structure of the schools created out of this movement are more about managing youth and serving the agendas of interested adults. As other “reforms,” the management model is a result of educational imperatives for young people originating not in their personal experiences but in the economic demands of an abstract future, posited by businessmen and political leaders concerned with competitiveness of America (Lesko, 2001, p. 94). Interestingly, the trend of expected alienation of children and adults as they grow up is reflected in the structures of schools as children move through them. The changes that occur when students move from elementary to middle or junior high school include replacing a single class with one teacher for the whole day to changing classes with as many as six different teachers throughout the day. One adult

engages a particular group of students for six to seven hours a day in elementary school, while this engagement is reduced to fifty to sixty minutes a day in middle school for each adult and to interaction with many.

Adults in classrooms can certainly play a role in the lives of youth for the better. As Sternheimer points out, “[n]avigating the challenges of sex, drugs, or alcohol is never easy for teens, but it is much harder for them if the adults in their lives are irresponsible themselves” (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 140). To compensate for adult unwillingness or ability to become more closely involved personally with youth, a market has arisen for devices such as surveillance cameras, which “are attempts to assert adult control remotely, that is, without adults necessarily having to be present in their kids’ lives” (Sternheimer, 2006, p. 149). To be sure, managers can develop trusting and respectful sorts of relationships with their subordinates, but the fact remains that all will be working for an agenda set from above; what separates transformative educators from managers is that the students should be at least equal participants in agenda-setting and assessment.

Even medical and biological research asserts that public schools are an environment set up in such a way that adolescent failure should be expected. While purporting to educate the minds of today’s young people, the institutional structure of schooling maintains tight corporal control, as described in *Educational Care*, a book by Dr. Mel Levine, a professor of pediatrics noted for his work on child development. While Levine’s book deals generally with children who have “learning problems,” it is important to understand the enormous impact that these conditions can cause on any student’s learning and well-being. For instance, his goal is to increase awareness of how somatic issues can affect a child’s performance and well-being at school. He writes,

For better or for worse, children take more than just their minds to school every day. Their bodies also have to meet the daily challenges. All students at all ages have somatic... concerns, but for some the concerns are extreme. Teachers and parents need to be especially sensitive to the somatic issues since often when these preoccupy a child, he or she may feel deeply ashamed and become highly secretive (Levine, 1994, pp. 217-8).

Some of these preoccupations include headaches, abdominal pain, menstrual discomfort, extreme cases of acne, and delayed or precocious puberty, among others.

Furthermore, Eric Jensen explains that “[t]o the student’s brain, biologically relevant school stimuli include opportunities to make friends (or find mates), quench thirst or hunger, notice a change in the weather, or interact with classroom visitors...” all of which are considered academically *irrelevant*, despite the necessity in extra-curricular life for being able to appropriately process and respond to these kinds of information (Jensen, 2005, p. 34-5). He is an author who has expounded on principles of brain-based learning, with a view to integrating rather than ignoring the presence of students’ bodies in the classroom as a way of improving learning. Together, these authors recognize that there are non-trivial distractions facing students. Yet, as Jensen says, “we ask them to orient their attention on the curriculum topic at hand and to maintain that attention until instructed otherwise, even if this means continuing to listen, read, or work on a single task for up to an hour” (Jensen, 2005, p. 35 ). The justification for conforming to this structure of schooling is that it should lead to the development of discipline of the mind over the body, even “in the midst of a gossip-ridden, physically active, emotionally sensitive, and highly social environment” (Jensen, 2005, p. 35).

All in all, adolescents have very different biological needs than adults do, yet they are being trained for “adult-type work habits” involving long stretches of work without

food or bathroom privileges, having to remain in an assigned work space for the duration of the work day. Adults know very well that at thirty years of age they cannot operate physically the same way as they could at twenty, nor at forty as they could at thirty, but this recognition does not extend to the differing needs and requirements of adolescents. Adolescents require more hours of sleep per night than children or adults, yet it is at these ages that they are granted the privilege of later bedtimes. While the extra time in the evening is generally compatible with amounts of homework assigned in accountability's name and the level of extracurricular involvement generally considered necessary for admission to college, it is *not* compatible with healthy development or stress management.

### *Conclusions*

There is a social construction of *adolescence* that is supported by biology and psychology, whose social ramifications have an effect on the well being of young people that is too significant to ignore. Not only does the label "adolescence" justify (or excuse) growing adult alienation from offspring, it also denies youth the right to become wage-earning participants in the economy. The way society educates its adolescents is also indicative of and an influence on the *adolescent* construction. Schools are the major vehicle that confers the "time-out" status enjoyed by society's youth, yet, oddly, schools do not take advantage of this time-out to adequately prepare or inform young people about the kinds of decisions they will have to make. Schools bear little to no responsibility for teen pregnancy, despite the poverty of information in many sex education programs which could fight ignorance about conception, contraception,

sexually-transmitted disease, and the relationship of drug and alcohol use to date rape and violence. In America, it is commonly considered that poverty and ignorance create teen mothers and youth who “grow up too fast.” Whether or not adolescents could ever be reduced to victims of a syndrome of raging hormones and psychological role confusion, they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect for these conditions, rather than with condescension. It is within every educator’s capability to examine what his or her attitudes are about people aged ten to twenty-six, and to question whether the preconceptions which shaped them are borne out in authentic interactions with youth. Thus can they become transformative educators. It is my hope that research projects designed to illuminate extant teacher preconceptions can be carried out and incorporated into teacher education programs, so that burgeoning educators can confront their prejudices in a critically reflective context of their own peers and professors. Thus would they be better equipped to prevent prejudice where it does not yet exist and to overcome it where it does.

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