

Defining Adolescents: Do not define them, guide them

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Introduction

As human beings, we are constantly seeking the answers to our questions. I see this in myself as unanswered questions lead to anxiety and frustration. I see this in my daughter as she explores and make sense of the world around her. When something does not work or is not as she expected, she is often frustrated by it. This is the story of our lives and the story of the attempt to understand adolescents.

As adults, we seek answers to why children do what they do. What goes through their minds? We want each and every aspect of our lives to have an explanation.

Adolescents have stumped adults for many years. I believe, as adults, we need to step back and allow adolescents to be who they are, unique and fascinating, and focus on providing them with the tools and wisdom they need to discover themselves and the world around them.

I say, do not define them; instead guide them to defining themselves. In this paper, I begin by explaining why defining adolescents any more than the simple definition of the age is futile. Understanding adolescences is even more impossible than defining it. I think appreciating adolescence is a more important than trying to make sense of it. I will move further into my explanation of this idea as my writing progresses. Multiple theories of adolescence are addressed and other outside parts of psychology are used to give a limited level of sense to adolescence and to avoid personal bias. The theories are

compared and contrasted and discussed in detail. Theories are simply conceptions that have been supported by a several people. In the last portion of my writing, I touch upon how conceptions and reality often conflict. These conflicts are one of the many reasons I believe it would be easier to appreciate this stage of life rather than try to explain and decipher such a complex beast to save time and avoid assumptions about youth. We truly do not need to understand all that life has to offer; sometimes it should simply be enough to appreciate its complexity.

Defining and understanding adolescents

A vast amount of time and money has been invested in trying to understand each other. Whether it is trying to understanding a different language or simply trying to make sense of a particular behavior. Adolescents have been an often misunderstood and misrepresented group among us. One could almost consider it natural to be curious about the world and seek out answers to those questions that arouse and challenge us.

Adolescents, for many, have been the challenge. This grouping that we have named “adolescents” is one that fills a spectrum of diversity. These individuals are not “cookie cutter” personalities or experiences by any means. They are much more like snowflakes to me. I do not mean to say that they are cold or frozen -- they are quite the opposite, in fact. As hypothetical snowflakes, they are each naturally unique and beautiful in their

own ways. When they collect together, or band together like in the *Breakfast Club*, they can create beautiful works of art (Tanen & Hughes, 1985).

Adolescence is defined as the transition from childhood to adulthood (Mucherah, lecture, August 25, 2016). However, what this transition entails is far more complex. Adolescence is indeed about a journey to adulthood and we as teachers are here to help ease that transition. I think that we sometimes neglect the other factors that are in play for our students. This is a time of social development along with cognition. This social aspect is incredibly “complex, controversial, and multifaceted” for our students (Killen & Coplan, 2011, p. 184). We are teaching students. The subject matter, be it science or math or the arts, is only the vessel by which we teach (Rodgers, lecture, January 2013).

I beg the question of can any of us fully understand what it means to be an adolescent? I do not believe that we can simply use one theory to tie adolescence up into a neat little package with an accompanying “how-to” manual. I do believe this is a pivotal stage in life for children. They are developing an identity in the world. The adolescent transition I experienced is distinctly different than that of my students as it is from student to student (Richter, 2006, p. 1903). As teachers, we must appreciate and support this stage of soul searching that our students are going through.

Adolescents are learning to be adults and finding out what that means to them as a person. Though it may be different for each adolescent, there are commonalities that can help those who seek to understand. However, I challenge those that seek to define

adolescence in detail to avoid the labels, categories, and perfect little boxes for these young people. Beware of making assumptions as the teacher in *The Breakfast Club* did (Tanen & Hughes, 1985). Simplifying some aspects of life leads to a loss of its elegance.

Nature versus Nurture

Development through adolescence is composed of many features beginning at a foundation of nature and nurture. The argument of nature versus nurture has burned for many scores. As human beings, we are often so deeply focused on being right or wrong that we forget about how some phenomena may not simply be black or white. There is research to support each side, a little of both, and neither of them.

Nature is something that many scientists fall back on. For scientists, basic biology and genetics can explain many issues that might arise. At the University of Manitoba, Saudino and Eaton found that there were genetic components involved in the temperament of the children they studied (1991, p. 1172). Temperament is only one aspect of human behavior but a very important one. If this is tied to one's genetics then they cannot be blamed for having a poor attitude. However, many of us want some level of accountability for an individual's actions and that is where we begin to look at nurture.

When I first picture what nurturing looks like, I imagine parents. It is a deeply embedded schema of who nurtures children. However, the reality is that nurture does not always come from parental figures. All too often, those adults are not in the lives of their

children or their lack the nurturing touch that their children need. Studies have found that a harsh home environment is correlated to a decline in overall health of the children in the household (Schofield et al., 2016). It is clear that a nurturing environment plays a large role in the contentment of children, which would inevitably affect their adolescence. The issue is not simply nature or nurture but a healthy combination of the two.

In another recent study, researchers looked at how nature and nurture work together to develop a child's temperament. Ivorra et al. found that the temperament of a group of children could be adjusted based on the presence or absence of a nurturing environment (2010). This provides evidence for the argument that healthy development is rooted in a combination of nature and nurture. When attempting to make sense of adolescents, we must keep all variables in mind, taking into consideration the spectrum between nature and nurture, black and white. Look for the grey areas. Seek out the nuances. There is no singular explanation for a phenomenon, especially for adolescents.

Comparing theories of adolescence

There is an abundance of theories and explanations in the world that attempt to bring organization and enlightenment to what adolescence is. One of many perspectives about adolescence is that it is a time of "storm and stress" (Hall, 1904, p.). Although this transitional period of life may be turbulent for some or most children, it does not fit the experiences of all adolescents. Many researchers are insisting that we move beyond this

idea that adolescence is a period of “storm and stress.” To them, the explanation given by Hall is far too simplistic and does not do this stage justice (Hollenstein, 2013, p. 445).

To truly make sense of adolescence, there is no singular explanation or theory that acts as an umbrella to cover this broad topic. We must look at all of the theories and take from each as it fits. First, one of the most controversial of all developmental theories is the psychosexual theory. Many of the ideas contained in Freudian works often seem a little farfetched to his readers. However, if we think about adolescence and leave out some of the most controversial aspects of Freud’s work, there are some seeds of interest.

As *Homo sapiens*, at the core of our beings, we are animals. Animals are driven by instinct and fight for survival. Survival for many species means to reproduce (Darwin, 1859). The Oedipus Complex not be the realistic situation for sons and their mothers, but there is some reality to the fact that these adolescents are undergoing puberty and experiencing hormonal changes that may increase their physical interest in their peers. In one study of child cancer patients, the researchers found that many of the subjects were concerned with their future sexually; fertility, functionality, and their lack of fulfillment sexually (Dobinson et al., 2016).

Many people are uncomfortable discussing basic needs such as this, but it is one factor affecting human behavior. If basic needs are not fulfilled, there is often a level of turmoil that the person feels, especially in adolescence when we are searching for our identities and a sense of belonging in the world (Meifen et al., 2005, p. 597). Freud may

have went into a little more detail than the general public is comfortable with, however he does seem to have had some insight into some of the foundational aspects of growth and development.

To take this one step further, there is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which talks about physiological needs being at the foundation of psychological development.

Children that are in crisis with these needs behave differently than they would if these needs were fulfilled (Harper, Harper, & Stills, 2003). Though these needs are not sexual in nature, they are still basic needs that let unchecked can cause a vast amount of unidentified stress and turmoil for children as they are trying to learn and develop into adults. Many variables affect development. One of these is at the middle of Maslow's pyramid. The need to be loved and belong connected to social life is a very prominent aspect of adolescence (Maslow, 1943, p. 381).

When I think about love and belonging, the quote by Alfred Lord Tennyson comes to mind: "'tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" (1849). For adolescents, feelings of belonging are of extreme importance. Through the second theory I will discuss, sociocultural cognitive theory by Vygotsky, we can begin to understand this need. Much of his research was centered about identity development and the research that followed sought to support his claims about adolescent development. Adolescents construct their identities and cognitive development through their interactions socially and culturally (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011).

The battle of theories of adolescent development shares similarities with the battle between nature versus nurture. However, as one can see, it is not black and white.

Although Freudian theorists believe that development is strictly physiological, other theorists like Vygotsky lean toward the social aspect of development. It is far being simply one way or the other and that is where theories like Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory comes into play.

A ecosystem is defined as "everything that exists in a particular environment" (Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary, 2016). The last theory, bioecological systems theory, accounts for the biology of the child and the environment that they are developing in. One study examined the effects of exposure to violence and the development of aggression in the children that were exposed. The researchers found that Israeli-Palestinian children that had experienced a violent environment were more likely to experience temperaments of aggression (Boxer et al., 2012). Genetic predispositions in combination with the right environment can trigger either the development of a hero or villain. Then who is the hero and who is the villain is a matter of perspective. My conception of adolescence will be different from the next because each of us has our own unique perception of reality. That is the beauty of the complexity of the human race.

Intersection of conceptions and reality

Conflict arises where perception and reality meet if they do not support one another. In *The Breakfast Club*, the teacher had his own conception of what adolescents

looked like. To him, each of those students were troublemakers and most of them would never amount to anything greater than that. He underestimated their abilities due to his assumption about them. He was unable to see the unique attributes that each of the students possessed (Tanen & Hughes, 1985). Developing an understanding adolescents cannot be achieved by grouping them all into one little bundle.

No matter how we try to justify our conceptions, in situations like *The Breakfast Club* the assumptions and conceptions we have that do not match the reality of another can be offensive and downright hurtful (Tanen & Hughes, 1985). As a child and student, I went through a phase of wearing all black, which is using referred to as being “emo” or “gothic.” During that time in my adolescences, my teachers and even my parents assumed that I would neglect my grades and have a poor attitude because those were the conceptions that were portrayed in society. This was hurtful and frustrating during this time of self-actualization. The people around me had this conception, but the reality was that wearing black clothes did not mean the person was a degenerate like the basket case or criminal in *The Breakfast Club*. As Bryan wrote in the essay, they were all criminals, princesses, athletes, brains, and basket cases (Tanen & Hughes, 1985). That year, I earned straight A’s and had a great social group. To someone on the outside looking in, there conceptions drove him or her to make inaccurate assumptions that conflicted with my reality. This is only one of many reasons why it is so important to me that we change our focus about adolescents.

I make an effort to avoid the typical assumptions about adolescents. Each one of my students has their own unique contributions to bring to my classroom. Each of them has unique needs to be satisfied. One aspect of my teaching philosophy is to dedicate a lot of my focus to helping guide my students through their unique developmental experience by identifying strengths, weaknesses, environmental trials, personal interest, and their conceptions of themselves. I believe in using all of those variables and more to be the best mentor I can be. My students deserve nothing less and far more than I can hope to give.

In a world where we are so deeply focused on making sense of each little phenomenon, I think we need to step back sometimes. We need to step back and let some aspects of life be. Instead of focusing on defining and dissecting adolescence, I challenge my colleagues to focus on doing their best to provide adolescents with the tools and wisdom to find themselves and make what little sense they can of life. As mentors, we are here to support and guide -- the rest is up to the unique and brilliant minds of our youth.

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