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## Discovering Our Adolescent Life Histories

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### **The Background: Teaching about Young Adolescent Development**

Most would agree that adolescence is a fascinating period of life. One of the interesting and engaging characteristics of young adolescence is the interdisciplinary nature of the developmental concerns and contexts. Not only are the issues, concerns, and contexts of development interrelated, but they are also complicated by various factors. Puberty now begins at a much younger age, the influx of technology for communication in the form of text and instant messaging by phone and computer, the impact of media on identity formation in transescents, and many other current trends should have a major impact on how we view and understand development.

For the past ten years I've been teaching young adolescent development to a growing number of both undergraduate and graduate middle grades majors. Over the course of these years, a multiplicity of tools have helped preservice teachers understand about 10 to 14 year olds, what might be considered 'the norm', how to decipher the various theories and stages, and most importantly, how developmental knowledge and awareness is helpful to the mid-level teacher. Both *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson and Davis, 2000) and *This We Believe* (1997) spoke of the importance of developmental knowledge stating further that young adolescents not only deserve, but require, teachers who have knowledge and skills important to working with 10 to 14 year olds. While attempting to ensure a high level of understanding with preservice teachers, one tool has remained constant all this time. I always begin and

end the section of the course on young adolescent development by having students remember, investigate, and try to make sense of their own adolescent life history. Developing a personal understanding of what we've gone through and what that means in the context of our selves, our peers, our schools, and our lives as adults can be immensely helpful in understanding our current students and what they are going through in their own lives.

### **Key Teaching Concepts Related to Young Adolescent Development**

■ **Five Aspects of Young Adolescent Development:** autonomy, social competence, sexuality, identity, and achievement. These aspects as well as a focus on current literature are both excellent ways to build a connection to current trends and issues with kids today. Preservice teachers are highly intrigued by the statistics on aspects of development and are further engaged by current fiction and nonfiction works that share the lives of adolescents in the context of a story.

■ **Cognitive, Social-Emotional (and moral), and Physical Development:** Covering these three broad areas allows for fact-based learning related to development including concepts such as concrete to formal operational thinking, especially as this connects to current thoughts on brain-based learning. Theorists and researchers such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Elkind, Maslow, and many others are covered to ensure a strong background knowledge on developmental issues.

■ **Learning Modes and Styles, Brain-based Learning, and Differentiating Instruction:**

Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, Sperry's Left Brain/Right Brain Thinking, McCarthy's 4Mat, and Tomlinson's Differentiation of Instruction are among some of the most widely applied developmentally-based theories on learning.

■ **Grouping Students for Instruction:**

Grouping strategies should be influenced by the characteristics of the learner. During young adolescence, developmental similarity is replaced by great variability, chronological age is not a completely reliable guide, students come with very different academic experiences, and teachers should supply the proper "positive structure" for success.

**Course/Field Research Assignments, Activities and Simulations**

■ **The Shadow Study:** The Shadow Study technique, a quasi-ethnographic procedure, supplies realistic snapshots of the educational experience individuals undergo during an actual school day. By focusing on a specific pupil and the minute-by-minute activities and actions of that pupil, a revealing picture of the educational process may be viewed. Although the actions of the teacher are part of this picture, by looking at the day's events through the eyes of the pupil, a different, and in many ways, more valid perspective is secured. This research procedure has been used by many researchers and thousands of students as an effective way to get closer to the reality of organized middle grades education. The Shadow Study is fully described in Stevenson's book, *Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds* (2002). What follows is a condensed description of the assignment provided to preservice teachers (created in conjunction with Michael Allen).

**Instructions to teacher candidates:** In this introductory middle grades course you will engage in an important research study. As part of your learning about the

realities of teaching at the middle level, you will become an "observer for a day" in a local middle grades environment. During the day you will observe an early adolescent, experiencing the school day as he or she does, recording events and impressions and subsequently reflecting on these observations in a formal written report. The experience provides the raw data needed to deepen your understanding of the realities of teaching early adolescents in the middle grades.

An early adolescent will be assigned to you. The student will not know he or she is being shadowed though you may be sure they will soon figure it out! On the shadow study day, arrive at school no later than 8:00 AM and report to the main office to sign in and be sure to put on your nametag. Locate the room of your student and introduce yourself to the teacher who will point out your student. Find a seat at the back of the room and relax.

Use the Study Observation Form to record your observations. The 7-10 minute interval will give you a bit of flexibility, but you should reflect the flow of activity. Begin a new time interval with each class change. Follow your student everywhere EXCEPT the OFFICE, SCHOOL NURSE, or RESTROOMS! Keep up with your student so you may experience the full school day. Try to see and feel the school experience as the student does. If your student asks what you are doing, simply say you are observing the entire class for the day as part of your preparation for teaching middle school. After school is dismissed, stop by the main office to SIGN OUT and express your appreciation for the opportunity to spend a day in the school.

The evening of the day of your Shadow Study observations, write out your impressions, reactions and reflections while the day's events are fresh in your mind. Remember

that ideas not immediately recorded usually enjoy the shelf life of un-refrigerated food! Close your Shadow Study with a “narrative reflection” of the experience. This final section of your report is critical. It should provide the reader with a reflective analysis of the experience of shadowing a student during his or her school day. Reflecting on your reactions to the experience is important to your deeper understanding of the myriad realities of teaching in public schools. Thus part of this narrative ought to address what the experience may mean to your professional future. Finally, it should not be simply a rehash of the observation form.

■ **Response Journal Prompts, “Reflecting On My Own Middle Level School Experiences”:**

A number of prompts are presented to teacher candidates throughout the semester related to development and other course concepts. While covering young adolescent development, candidates investigate their own adolescent history while responding to poems, literature, current research, as well as some of the questions below.

Think about your school experiences:

- What school(s) did you attend at this age (10-14)? Where and when?
- What do you remember most about how this school level differed from your elementary and high school experiences?
- What do you remember most about your teachers?
- What do you remember most about other students?
- What do you remember most about school life?
- What grade (or class) do you specifically recall with fondness? Why?
- What grade (or class) would particularly like to forget? Why?
- What do you recall about peer and parental pressures?
- What do you recall about your own

feelings during these years?

- What other aspects of your attendance at a middle or junior high school that you wish to share with others?

■ **Literature Circles:** In class, we read various poems, novels, short stories, and articles related to development. The *Middle School Journal* and the NMSA website are constant sources of great material as well as authors notorious for narratives with strong developmental connections such as Gary Soto (try, “Seventh Grade”), Chris Crutcher, and Laurie Halse Anderson. Students divide into teams during the first week of class. These teams become literature circle groups and they work together in and out of class on simulations and activities that face-to-face as well as online and which require them to complete tasks such as create flexible schedules, design interdisciplinary and integrative curriculum, and so on. Together the literature circles also read one fiction and one non-fiction selection and discuss. A listing of choices from Fall, 2005 is below:

One nonfiction selection from the list below:

- Crutcher, C. (2004). *King of the mild frontier: An ill-advised autobiography*. HarperCollins Childrens Books.
- Giannetti, C. C., & Sagarese, M. (2003). *What are you doing in there?*
- Jackson, L. (2002). *Freaks, Geeks, and Asperger's Syndrome: A user's guide to adolescence*. Kinglsey: Jessica Publishers.
- Perlestein, L. (2004). *Not much just chillin': The hidden lives of middle schoolers*.

One fiction selection from the list below:

- Myers, W. D. (2001). *Monster*. HarperCollins Childrens Books.
- Anderson, L. H. (2001). *Speak*. Penguin Group.
- Cisneros, S. (1991). *The house on Mango Street*. Vintage Books.

Reilly Giff, P (2004). *Pictures of Hollis Woods*. Random House Children's Books.

■ **The Personal Research Assignment, "Adolescent Life History Paper":** In the January, 2006, *Middle School Journal*, Bishop and Allen-Malley note that a "growing number of teacher educators recognize the power of memoir and autobiography in authenticating learning (p. 21). The authors further remark the importance of "grounding the preservice teachers in their own middle school years" (p. 21). I have used the Adolescent Life History Paper for nine years. What follows is a condensed description of the assignment provided to preservice teachers (originally created by Thomas S. Dickinson).

This paper is designed to provide you with an opportunity to apply your knowledge about young adolescent developmental characteristics through examining your own growth and development during your young adolescent years (generally 10-14). The emphasis of this assignment is the integration of what you know about young adolescent characteristics and what you are observing in your field site into a complete picture as opposed to segmenting various aspects of growth and development. In the construction of your paper you should include your own personal knowledge, your parents or others who knew you during this period, your knowledge gained from the growth and development class, your text readings as well as any class discussions on this topic. You will also have a degree of freedom in manner of presentation of the finished paper.

The paper that you create should be developed across seven dimensions. This is to insure a credible end product. There are three developmental dimensions and four contexts across which you should develop your profile.

### **Physical Development Concerns**

While your physical development is not the only developmental issue to examine, it is important. You should be particularly careful in commenting on and discussing a range of growth and development concerns as well as physical attributes. The following list is intended to provide a beginning point for possible physical development concerns:

- Speed of maturation - early maturer, late maturer, developmentally average
- Actual stature - height, weight, body build
- Sexual development
- Distinctive physical features or recognizable characteristics such as left-handedness, braces, or glasses
- Attitude toward physical development

### **Intellectual Development Concerns**

You need to develop your intellectual profile with a view that you were a thinking, acting, responding individual. You should thoroughly examine your knowledge of Piagetian stage development relative to your growth during these years. Given these variables you should integrate these into your profile of intellectual development. Consider the following in the intellectual component of your profile:

Intellectual development does not necessarily equal school achievement or success

You should carefully consider the stage of intellectual development in terms of dealing with self and relations with others

### **Social-Emotional Development Concerns**

Using an Eriksonian stage development perspective, you should locate yourself at the appropriate developmental stage. You should also realize that while you were at a certain stage you were still working through elements of the previous stages. As has been mentioned, ensure that you maintain consistency and integration of this stage of your development with other areas, particularly the family, peer group, and school.

### **Family Context**

Your development occurred within some form of family structure. Consider the following:

- Family size and type —nuclear, extended, single parent, foster; number of adults and siblings present; birth order in the family; relationship with other individuals in the family
- The larger demographics —Where did you live? (urban, suburban or rural setting); who worked in the family and where; what type of housing did you live in; what income level
- What larger aspirations and values did the family hold?

### **Peer Group Context**

You had relationships with other young adolescents-your peer group. Consider the following when developing the context:

- Did you have a best friend?
- What kind of friends did you have?
- What kind of relationships (if any) did you have with the opposite sex?
- How did your peer group spend time?
- Were there any conflicts between the peer group and school or home?

### **School Context**

You attended school. Consider the following:

- What type of school did you attend?
- Were you a home schooler?
- What did you like and not like about your school?
- At what level did you achieve academically and socially?
- How did your intellectual development relate to your school achievement?

### **Societal Context**

Everyone lives within the framework of a larger cultural and social milieu. Within these parameters you should consider the following when developing this context:

- How were you influenced by local and world issues or events?
- What sort of world view or vision

did you form at this time?

- What sort of value system did you develop at this time?

### **Requirements**

The following requirements apply to your finished paper:

- 5-6 pages in length
- word-processed or typed
- include a cover sheet that is stapled to the paper (no report covers, folders, etc.)
- cover sheet should have name, class number, title of the paper, and due date
- double-spaced throughout
- standard one-inch margins top, bottom, left, and right
- spell-checked, edited for grammar and punctuation, sentence construction, and other concerns
- Your paper should exhibit a degree of creativity, with an emphasis on the overall integration of the various areas of concern into a meaningful whole. Do not approach each of the topics in a sequential fashion, but instead search for connections among the issues and events during that period of your life.

### **Style and Creativity Options**

The following suggestions are not meant to limit your options, but provide you with a few examples from former papers:

- write the paper as if it is an adolescent's journal
- include pictures and captions within the writing to illustrate a story or points
- include school work or report cards to illustrate points made about development
- include art created during early adolescence to illustrate points
- include interviews with family members or others who knew you 'way back when'
- include information or pictures of sports or academic clubs when describing the impact those organizations had on your development

- center descriptions of development around world events occurring at the time and if these events had an impact on your life
- include pieces of literature, quotes, or poems that describe your own development or feelings during early adolescence
- include an artifact within your descriptions to represent each of the four contexts
- include quotes from the course text while describing your own experiences

## Adolescent Life History Paper - 150 Points Total

Components	Level 1	Level 2
Required Parts	0 Pts No cover sheet/notations present; no title	5 pts Cover sheet with notations and title present
Focus	0 pts The paper does not maintain a clear focus on adolescent development	10 pts The paper maintains a strong focus on adolescent development
Composition & Editing	0-14 pts The paper had numerous errors; the papers has not been carefully edited; the paper demonstrates a poor grasp of spelling, grammar, and/or punctuation; errors significantly detract from the paper	15-25pts The paper demonstrates mature composition and editing with few/no spelling, grammatical, or punctuation errors; mature composition adds to the overall effect of the content of the paper
Introduction	0-7 pts The focus and direction of the paper is not introduced; no statements present concerning the direction	8-15 pts The focus and direction of the paper is introduced; general introductory statements are present
Developmental Dimensions	0-15 pts All three dimensions of adolescent developments are not investigated within the paper; there is not sufficient investigation of the developmental areas; relevant examples are not used	16-30 pts All three dimensions of adolescent development are investigated within the paper; there is sufficient investigation of the areas; relevant examples are used
Contexts	0-15 pts All four contexts that effect development are not discussed; relevant examples are not used	16-30 pts All four of the contexts are discussed; relevant examples are used
Conclusion	0-7 pts No/minimal statements are present concerning the overall paper	8-15 pts Final statements are present including a synthesis of points made and issues addressed
Creativity	0-10 pts The developmental dimensions are discussed in a sequential fashion; composition is not engaging for the reader; little or no analysis or depth in explanation of development is present	11-20 pts Thoughts expressed are imaginative and engaging for the reader; the paper maintains direction; a distinct perspective on development is demonstrated

\*Adolescent Life History Paper originally developed by Thomas S. Dickinson

## Coming Full Circle: What do the Teacher Candidates Get From All This Work?

As a teacher of middle school concepts, I am always struck by the final conclusions made by the teacher candidates. The simulations and assignments that require the most critical thought are disliked, and sometimes downright hated, during the course of the semester. However, during final seminar and later within course evaluations, candidates often sing a different tune. My goal is for future teachers to truly understand key developmental issues, to understand what is going on with adolescents today, how that might or might not be different from their own adolescence, and begin to apply this knowledge and awareness to teaching on a day-to-day basis. If I can just get them to turn the corner and see even a hint of connection between their teaching, student learning, and development, I am joyous. What many of them achieve is much more. Bishop and Allen-Malley (2006) conclude their recent article with a critical point.

While reading the fundamental middle school literature is an essential step toward knowing *in one's mind* how to be an educator of middle level learners, systematic reflection on one's own experience at that age can help educators know *in their hearts* how to do so. (p. 28)

What follows is a few quotes from Adolescent Life History Papers in recent years (all printed with permission of the author).

*My childhood was not perfect, but it was mine and it was unique.*

*You ever had one of those teachers that just changes the way you feel about life? Well, that's what Ms. Dorriety did for me; she was my 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher.*

*It is evident that my view on many things centered how others viewed me. I was trapped in my own little world, trying to figure out if others were as critical of me as I was of myself.*

*I would not change anything that has happened because I would not be the woman that I am today if it were not for the events I survived as an adolescent.*

*I like thinking about the point in Holes when the boys are told why they are digging. The main character thinks, "We dig for more than personality." I kind of feel that way about my adolescence. I was digging; digging for more that I could ever know at the time.*

## References

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