

Preparing for adult life – connecting the personal, social and cognitive worlds of young people

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This paper examines trends in the personal, social and emotional worlds of young people. These trends show that to be prepared for adult life young

people need an education that builds on their personal, social and emotional development alongside their intellectual and not in a separate and fragmented way, as at present. We need to reconceptualise how young people learn and to see that how they learn impacts on deep challenges they face, such as those of emotional and social well-being.

Today the concept of 'adolescence' and what it means to be an adolescent varies a great deal in the UK.ⁱ There are big differences of class, culture, locality, identity and resources. However some trends are detectable.ⁱⁱ Increasing economic stratification both globally and in our society threatens the developmental opportunities available to wealthier and poorer young people. The demands placed on adolescents are increasing. Adult worlds are becoming more complex, rationalised and fast moving: with this increased complexity comes the need for adolescents to learn, navigate, create structures and make choices. A wide repertoire of interpersonal resources and skills will be needed and adolescents will spend longer periods achieving these fundamental competencies, since the period of adolescence has lengthened. The occupational worlds of young people will also become more complex.

The interpersonal landscape of adolescents

The landscape of important relationships that shape adolescents' personal and social development is changing

dramatically across many nations. The family is centre stage in this landscape and it, as well as non-family relationships, has altered. There will be a larger and more diverse portfolio of relationships and increased involvement with peers. Given this landscape young people will need relationships as well as competencies in relationships. Adolescents will need to master the ability to *form, manage and end relationships*. They will need to be adept at sizing up people, negotiating trust and seeking support. They will need skills for creating communities, managing conflict and repairing breaches. The social arenas in which adolescents learn these relationship skills are changing – peer arenas are more important. This experience of varied relationships' learning can provide more versatile skills for creating and managing connections to others. Education is an important arena for this learning to be developed.

The future will contain fewer hierarchical relationships. Parent figures are becoming less authoritarian and authority more based on reason, explanation and merit. There will be fewer opportunities for adolescents to develop *skills for hierarchical relationships*. So young people need to assimilate effective styles of authority – some may have negative models of authority. Boys in particular are getting few opportunities to learn parenting skills through childcare experiences.ⁱⁱⁱ The *skills for relationships with equals* will expand due to increased involvement with peers.^{iv} The impact of this increased time on the development of cooperative patterns of relating is debatable. Greater peer interaction does not necessarily equate with cooperative and socially constructive behaviour. Adults matter, thus early experiences of trust in adults will be important and cooperative learning also becomes important in education.

There is a considerable debate about education and intimate relationships. In the UK there is great concern about

teenage pregnancy rates and issues surrounding sexually transmitted diseases.^v One position is that the general approach to sexual and intimate relationships should be one of prohibition and restraint. Another argument is that we should accept that there has been a development in the landscape of adolescent relationships: we need to prepare young people for this world and should take a wider focus than we do currently.

Finally the other key feature of this interpersonal landscape is its cultural difference. Young people will need *the ability to move between worlds*. The current complexity and sophistication of adolescents' personal and social worlds needs to be taken account of in education and schooling. What seems to be needed is the development of agency in young people so that they can move purposefully in their worlds. This theme holds too for adolescent health and well-being.

Adolescent health and well-being

There are signs that issues related to emotional well-being are the biggest challenge facing many young people, for example by 2020 depression is expected to be the second leading cause of disease burden.^{vi} Studies stress the importance of developing young people as active participants in their own health and argue against the tendency to see them as passive. The development of resilience – the quality of perseverance, feelings of self-efficacy and the interrelated success in learning – is key to later functioning as an adult.^{vii}

Mastery and performance

Carol Dweck^{viii} has undertaken significant research related to the concepts of resilience and mastery, which link these notions of helplessness and mastery and are central to the themes already

highlighted. She differentiates between mastery and performance orientation and shows that teachers in schools, as well as parents and carers, tend to operate in one of these two modes and at very early stages. A performance orientation focuses on intelligence as a fixed identity and judgements tend to be made on the basis of ability. Children are quick to give up in the face of difficulties, keen to save face and vulnerable when faced with new situations for challenges. A mastery orientation is when children are driven by learning goals and those who teach them tend to believe that intelligence is malleable and can be increased through effort. Children who experience such an approach from adults tend to increase their effort in the face of challenge and are flexible in their learning. These processes impact on children's sense of resilience and feelings of self-efficacy and the orientation is developed at a very young age. This has a direct bearing on health-related issues such as learned helplessness and depression. The processes Dweck suggests we should be using and developing, such as problem solving, making mistakes and adopting a learning approach are those that studies of adolescents' future needs also recommend. This work also connects up what happens in schools in terms of approaches to learning and personal, social and emotional well-being.

These trends and challenges seem to suggest that certain qualities and experiences are important to develop in adolescents, for example the sense of agency and that we need to take seriously the personal and social elements of learning, especially the world of relationships. Current thinking and practice does not ignore these elements but they are not a driver for the received curriculum and our curriculum still sees them as separate lands. The experience of students is not so compartmentalised. Everything matters – all the transactions, the whole curriculum and all the students. We need to aim to develop active learners in an integrated fashion, rather than developing more and more separate initiatives in response to individual issues as they emerge. If we were to focus on the development of agency and to take seriously the learning about and involvement in relationships, we would impact on learning and personal, social and emotional development. As Dweck comments:

'Self-esteem is not a thing you have or don't have – it is a way of experiencing yourself when you are using your resources well – to master challenges, to learn, to help others.'

This wider view of the curriculum would also fit the new role of the school

and the outcomes for children as embedded in the Children Act of 2004. Here all those working with children are viewed as having this wider role of developing the personal, social, emotional and cognitive.

Notes

- i Thomson, R, and Holland, J, *Inventing adulthood: young people's strategies for transition*, ESRC, London, 2002
- ii Larson, R, Bradford Brown, B, and Mortimer, J, (eds.) *Adolescents' preparation for the future – perils and promises: a report on the study group on adolescence in the 21st century*, Ann Arbor, MI
- iii Maccoby, E, *The two sexes, growing up apart, coming together*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA
- iv Larson, R, et al (eds.) *Adolescents' preparation for the future – perils and promises: A report of the study group on adolescence in the 21st century*, Ann Arbor: MI
- v *Teenage pregnancy*, Social Exclusion Unit, The Stationery Office Ltd, London, 1999
- vi *The world health report 1998: life in the twenty first century*, World Health Organisation, Geneva, Switzerland, 1998
- vii Rutter, M, *Pathways to from childhood to adult life: the role of schooling*, Pastoral Care in Education, 1991, 9, 3, pages 3–10.
- viii Dweck, C, *Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development*, Taylor and Francis, Hove, E Sussex, 2000

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