

Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development For Educators by Michael J.

Nakkula and Eric Toshalis

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Sceptics could be forgiven for doubting any book could deliver on a title as ambitious as *Understanding Youth*. Coupled with its American context, this book risks being overlooked by the British audience, but its value to teachers, carers, psychologists and policy makers around the world is substantial. Nakkula and Toshalis have created a unique resource for education professionals which is refreshing and highly practical.

Organised into twelve clearly defined chapters, the authors ensure that the reader can dip into topics of particular interest, although the text as a whole is lively and inspiring throughout and is likely to be of special importance to school managers and those who work with secondary-aged, adolescent students.

Chapter 1 sets the tone for the rest of the book. Nakkula and Toshalis discuss Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development and introduce the term 'reciprocal transformation' (p.14) to describe the effect of educators on students and vice versa. This notion is key, they argue, to adolescent development and to the effectiveness of the adults working with them. They suggest that for teachers to be successful, they must be 'connected' with their students – tuned in to their lives and emotions.

To promote the development of one's students and safeguard the development of one's own craft as an educator demands that we stay connected to the ways in

which adolescents are interpreting and constructing their lives and, in turn, ours. (p.15)

The second chapter examines the development of adolescent identity and explores Erikson's theory of identity as a developmental concept. An expansion of Freud's theory of psychosexual development, Erikson focused on the social aspects of Freud's work, creating a theory where links are established between individual and social contexts of everyday life. Takkula and Toshalis describe Erikson's theory as *psychosocial* (linking thoughts and actions to a social, rather than sexual, origin) and go on to summarise the eight developmental stages identified by Erikson. The fifth stage, Identity vs. Role Confusion (p.20), is the stage associated most closely with adolescence, and the authors neatly explain the importance of this stage, using a case study to clarify the relevance of Erikson's work for professionals engaging with this often challenging group. Chapter 3 goes on to establish Nakkula and Toshalis' expansion of the theories of Vygotsky and Erikson, emphasising the interactive component of identity development through the theories of social constructivists such as Vygotsky.

Chapter 3 also discusses the connection between risk-taking, or experimentation, and creativity. The authors suggest that students need to be active agents in their own learning if that learning is to have personal relevance and lead to a stronger sense of self for the young person. Thus if we are to support our students through adolescence into adulthood, we need to ensure that they are given ample opportunity to define their own identities in the activities we design and discussions we lead.

Throughout the book, practical examples illustrate the authors' key ideas, giving adults working with adolescents helpful strategies in an insightful and inspiring way. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the

concepts of flow and relational identity in some detail, and highlight ways in which professionals can tap into the unique potential of the young people in their care. These sections of the book are perhaps of special interest to those working with students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, because of the motivational approaches they describe.

Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 are devoted to issues surrounding gender, racial, ethnic and sexual identity development. These chapters discuss specific theories in accessible language and will appeal differently to individual readers. The chapter on gender identity is noteworthy for its candid and realistic discourse.

The chapter entitled *Faith and the Development of Ultimate Meaning* is especially useful as many professionals lack confidence in tackling this topic with students, and non-specialist teachers will find this in section an illuminating resource. Going beyond ideas about religion, the authors look at adolescent enquiry about existential concerns and moral ways of knowing. They demonstrate how the words ‘faith’ and ‘identity’ can be interchangeable, and how for a young person questioning the meaning of faith, a safe forum for discussion can be difficult to find. Although they claim not to favour any individual form of religion or spirituality, the authors focus heavily on these forms of faith and do not explore some of the philosophical concepts which may also shape identity and faith development.

The penultimate chapter deals with the transition from school to a career – or, rather, adulthood. Although from a sociological perspective, this chapter raises some important issues, it is, at least in the UK, somewhat old-fashioned in its approach and is the one chapter in the book where the cultural differences between the UK and North America are most apparent. Although the chapter

includes interesting debate on the career choices of gay, lesbian and transgender students (p.237), it offers less guidance than other chapters and the case studies simply illustrate difficulties rather than demonstrate possible strategies for growth.

The final chapter draws heavily on the work of Bronfenbrenner and Spencer, developmental scholars concerned with 'Educational Ecology'. Via the theories of these two researchers, the authors scrutinise the impact of the media on adolescent development and the life choices of students. They suggest, for example, that classroom discussion of sexualised imagery may empower students to be more critical of the media's portrayal of intimacy and beauty, and less bound by the messages that such imagery sends out to young consumers.

'Understanding Youth' is undoubtedly a useful book for any adult working with secondary aged students. Ideal for teacher education programmes, it should be essential reading for newly qualified teachers and will serve as a refreshing stimulus for those more seasoned professionals. Written in a very straightforward and accessible style, it avoids the lecture-type tone of many similar textbooks and the authors demonstrate a genuine empathy with this demanding age group.