WHO'S THAT ADOLESCENT IN YOUR CLASS?: UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL WORLD OF THE ADOLESCENT *

M. I. Ehrlich

Universidad Anahuac

This paper will present a discussion of the various psychosocial characteristics of adolescents, common problems experienced by them, and strategies to use in the classroom. The purpose of the discussion is to demystify the adolescent for classroom teachers in order to help them interact more effectively with their students. It is also expected that based upon an understanding of the psychological world of the adolescent, teachers can manage the classroom situation in such a way as to facilitate their student's successful social and academic performance and avoid emotionally-draining conflicts with them.

Much of the misunderstanding about adolescents comes from the psychological literature which describes the adolescent as a person torn by emerging sexual and aggressive desires. Adolescence is generally regarded as a period of turmoil, tension, and misguided attempts at independence. One sees street gangs, violence, grafitti on walls and buses, and vandalism and concludes that all adolescents are beyond help.

Many of the popular notions about the negative aspects of adolescents have been generated by psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers who have focused primarily on troubled youngsters. G. Stanley Hall, for instance, a famous psychologist during the early 1900's, wrote:

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> The teens are emotionally unstable and pathological. It is the age of natural inebriation without the need of intoxicants, which made Plato define youth as spiritual drunkedness. (1904)

When one examines the many studies about the presence of pathology in adolescence, the "typical" adolescent is far from the impulse-ridden, uncontrollable person that is commonly suspected. In one study (Hathaway & Monachesi, 1963), researchers used the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), a test to measure the presence of psychopathology, and found that only 10-20% of the 11,000 adolescents tested scored within the pathology range on the various subtests. This figure stands in contrast to the approximate rate of 23% of the adult population who manifest psychopathological symptoms.

In another study, Offer, Sabshin & Marcus (1965, as cited in Weiner, 1970) reported that through the use of repetitive interviewing, psychological testing, and family studies with 84 adolescent boys, they found that the "average" adolescent was:

a) almost completely free from psychopathology, severe physical deficits, or severe physical illness.

b) able to experience affect flexibly and able to achieve successful resolution of his conflicts, and

c) able to feel a part of the larger cultural environment and to be aware of its norms and values. [1]

The results of these and similar studies suggest that adolescence, in and of itself, does not produce pathology. If one encounters a disturbed adolescent, one may look to poor family relations, problems with the peer group, or tensions related to a learning disability. One should not shrug off the adolescent's problems as just a sign of "being a teenager". An adolescent in trouble needs special attention and understanding.

Many of an adolescent's difficulties stem from an unsuccessful resolution of the psychosocial tasks which confront him [2] during adolescence (between the ages of 12 and 20). The

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1. The reader is referred to the original studies for a more complete description of the authors' results.
2. Masculine pronouns are used for stylistic ease and not to imply gender.

about classroom aggression, as their child acts "just perfect" at home. They may be more willing to accuse the teacher than to recognize their own part in the problem. Teachers should make it "standard operating procedure" to investigate the manner in which the student is disciplined at home and how the parents react to the adolescent's growing social interests. With this information, teachers can make some preliminary diagnosis if the student is using the classroom as an arena to resolve family conflicts.

Closely related to the development of new social relationships is the adolescent's need to develop emotional independence. Being emotionally independent means that the adolescent can make his own decisions, develop his own ideas and values, and accept responsibility for his behavior. Emotional independence also involves the freedom to be dependent when life situations become too complex and stressful.

Part of the difficulty with the aggressive young adolescent (ages 12-15) is his insistence on challenging authority. The need to demonstrate his independence generally arises from his insecurity regarding his ability to be independent. It is as if he were reading a script, and were too afraid to play himself. Older adolescents (ages 15 or 16 and older) are usually easier to reason with as their developing self-confidence allows them to accept direction and advice.

Another major psychosocial task of adolescents is learning how to manage and balance the many social rules which constrain their daily interactions. The classroom, for instance, often presents a mixture of rules and standards to which the student feels obliged to conform. The peer group exerts tremendous pressure to follow certain behavioral patterns (remember his need to belong), while the teachers expect the student to follow other criteria. Some teachers, for example, will establish the rule (stated implicitly or explicitly) that students should limit their question-asking behavior with regard to classroom policy. The peer group will hold a rule (stated implicitly or explicitly) that policy should be questioned as often as possible. When a student asks, "why do I have to do that?", the teacher may view the question as an arrogant

challenge to his rules, while the peer group will view the same question as an appropriate symbol of independence. One way to avoid this situation is to involve the students in the making of the social rules. This way the peer group can be made an ally to the smooth functioning of the class.

The search for emotional independence and the process of learning and selecting appropriate social rules are related to the adolescent's task of developing values which are in harmony with the environment. The often contradictory values and standards of the family, school and peer group must be combined appropriately in order to avoid debilitating emotional problems. This harmony-seeking process, however, is slow and filled with many highs and lows. Teachers are often confronted with apparently inexplicable changes in the adolescent's behavior. Such changes may be the result of an unresolved conflict or of not knowing which rules and standards he should follow. Variability in the classroom performance may also result from the natural and quite healthy experimentation that is required to develop harmony. One of the most effective ways of dealing with this trial-and-error period is to use the adolescent's desire for autonomy and emotional independence to help him reason through the purpose and consequence of his actions.

Common Problems of Adolescents

Despite the fact that the problems adolescents face are as varied as the individuals themselves, there are general problem areas that should help the teacher place the adolescent behavior in proper perspective. The problems which are to be discussed below are related to the degree to which the adolescent fails to deal successfully with the psychosocial tasks mentioned above.

During adolescence the ability to think, compare, and analyse develops and provides the young adult with many opportunities to reflect upon his life. These cognitive skills present a double-edged sword; they allow the adolescent to become more aware and conscious of his world, while at the same time he is able to perceive the injustice, inconsistencies and conflicts which exist in his life. The adolescent may begin to focus primarily on the negative. He

may begin to dwell on the purpose of life and the meaning of everything. He realizes that there are many different standards and criteria for his behavior and may be torn by the question, "what is the right thing to do?". Some adolescents will believe that they are powerless, without the ability or opportunity to manage their lives.

Each of these difficulties contributes to the problem of alienation. Feeling alienated can provoke serious problems for the adolescent. His classroom behavior may reflect the anger, apathy, confusion or depression which frequently accompanies this syndrome. For the teacher, the alienated student is quite difficult to manage. Very often a frank and honest discussion with the adolescent, allowing him to express and analyse his doubts and disappointments, can help alleviate, if not cure, his distress.

Another major problem for teenagers is a confusion about their identity. "Who am I?" "What are my values?" "Which standards do I follow?" "What will I do with my life?" Questions such as these reflect various sources of confusion which can block the development of a solid sense of identity.

Although self-evaluation is normal and healthy, some adolescents are unable to cope with the anxiety stimulated by the ambivalence they feel about their lives, and the many contradictions they encounter in their personal relationships. Without the opportunity to talk about their feelings and ideas, to set realistic goals and objectives, their confusion and doubt may lead them towards anti-social behavior. For some adolescents it is more rewarding to create a "bad" reputation than to have none at all. One adolescent told me, "I couldn't be the smartest because of my older brother, nor the cutest, so I became the best of the worst!"

The adolescent who develops such a negative identity is usually highly defensive and rigid (as there is so much hurt and insecurity he is protecting). There is usually a part of their psychological make-up that would like to be successful and accepted. Yet a vicious cycle develops. The adolescent expects rejection, and acts in a way (based upon this expectation) that provokes the anger and disapproval of others. He does not understand

that his own behavior stimulates the rejection, believes that his expectations were fulfilled and therefore continues to act in an aggressive and provocative manner.

The defensiveness, the hostility, and the suspicion of these adolescents make it extremely difficult to work with them. It may be helpful to let them periodically "blow off steam" in an acceptable fashion, and provide subtle feedback about the consequences of their behavior. It is also useful to employ whatever skills they have to help them experience some degree of success. One boy in my class manifested all of the above symptoms. After many fights and conflicts in class, I finally realized I could use his aggressiveness, and made him an aide during physical education. Experiencing some success with this responsibility, we were able to start a working relationship.

It is also important to note that many adolescents with a negative identity have marked difficulties with learning. This makes academics a continual struggle, and these students frequently look to create diversions from their academic limitations through the use of antisocial behavior. Teachers must tread softly in the manner in which they work on school tasks, or risk the student's defensive attempts to prove that he "knows everything".

Working with the Adolescent in the Classroom

As a result of my work as a junior high school teacher and consultant to teachers of emotionally disturbed children, I have found that there are various strategies a teacher can employ in order to work effectively with the adolescent.

Probably the most important rule for working with adolescents is to SET THE EXAMPLE. The old adage, "actions speak louder than words" is especially relevant in this case. If you expect honesty and openness from your students, be honest and open. If you want to be treated with respect, be respectful.

Not only is it important how you behave with your students,

the manner in which you interact with colleagues and administrators also provides a model. One student made the following observation, "After every time the principal would come to talk to my teacher, she would critize him behind his back. If I made the same kind of comment about the principal, she would yell at me for being disrespectful. What garbage!" Teachers must be careful about how they behave and what they say with adolescents, as they are distressingly perceptive and skilled at uncovering hypocrisy.

Another important strategy for teachers is to establish and maintain consistent, reasonable, and well-thought-out limitations on the students' behavior. Teachers should periodically review their rules, both written and unwritten (e.g. students should not interrupt, students should not challenge my authority) in order to determine their appropriateness. Teachers should also be prepared to explain why a rule is important and what purpose it serves. If the class can be involved in the making of rules and in deciding what consequences will exist for breaking them, much aggravation can usually be avoided. If, in a careful review of the expectations or standards for classroom behavior, a teacher finds a rule that cannot be justified, it would be best to eliminate the rule, or find a way to adjust the rule to make it justifiable.

Providing the adolescent with a wide range for his emotional expression will help create a more natural classroom environment. Anger, boredom, frustration, sadness, and excitement are all normal aspects of human expression. Limits, however, must be set with regard to the form in which such emotions are displayed. Accepting and directing appropriately the student's anger, for instance, is not the same as allowing him to throw books on the floor or verbally abuse other people. Appropriate forms of emotional expression can be discussed with the class and an agreement can be reached regarding the acceptable guidelines for such expression.

Given the adolescent's basic desire for independence and individuality, teachers should allow the student every opportunity to learn responsibility. This will involve, at times, watching silently as mistakes are made and later helping the student analyse

what went wrong. Learning independent behavior inevitably includes breaking rules and suffering the consequences. Many teachers make the unfortunate mistake of protecting the student from his own errors. Some teachers, in the name of being a "nice guy", will help the student to the point of retarding his emotional growth.

The teacher's role, in the author's opinion, is that of a benevolent dictator. Control should always be in the hands of the teacher, unless for strategic purposes control is given to the students. He must ensure that the students meet the classroom standards and learn the consequences of fulfilling or not fulfilling academic and social standards. The teacher is a facilitator, an advisor; a person to provide emotional support, encouragement and guidance when a student fails.

Finally, it is recommended that the teacher learn to listen to the adolescent. As with any form of communication, there are overt and covert messages. The overt message is conveyed in the exact words used to express an idea. The covert message is what is implied by what is said. When an adolescent says "I don't care if I don't have any friends", there are many messages being sent. On the most obvious level he is providing information about a certain attitude he has regarding his peer group. The covert message, however, provides considerably more significant and relevant information. He may be saying, "How can I make friends?" or "Will you be my friend?", or "Please pay attention to me". The teachers must learn to read between the lines, and look for the hidden message. The hidden message is given by the many non-verbal clues which constitute a communicative act: tone of voice, facial expression, intonation or stress placed on certain words, and body language (e.g. a shrug of a shoulder).

Once a message is received accurately there are several ways of responding that will encourage further communication. Many times a pat on the shoulder, a well-timed "uh huh" can convey to the student that you are listening and understanding. Helping the adolescent reason through his confusions by the conservative use of questions will also

help facilitate communication.

There are also many ways to cut off communication. Some of the more popular methods include: [3]

Placating — This implies that the student is told that everything will be fine, that he should not worry. A problem exists with placating in that there is no way to predict that everything will be fine, and the teacher ends up creating false confidence. Also by placating, there is the chance that the student will interpret it as indicating that his problem is not terribly important to his listener.

Examples:

"I wouldn't be concerned if I were you."

"You're exaggerating."

Blaming — This is when the teacher tells the student that he caused all the problems. By blaming, one ignores the fact that every problem exists within a relationship, and fault does not lie in just one person. Blaming is the surest way to provoke the student's anger and unwillingness to communicate further. Rather than blaming, one can search for the causes of the problem with the student. A student can be helped to understand what part he played in the problem by being asked, "What could have been done differently to avoid this

3. The reader interested in a more detailed discussion of communication roadblocks is referred to "Teachers Effectiveness Training", by Thomas Gordon (1978) and "Peoplemaking", by Virginia Satir (1972).

problem?" or "What can you do differently in the future to make sure such things don't happen again?".

Examples:

"You obviously didn't pay attention."

"You never seem to know what to do."

"I don't want to talk about it because you never follow my advice."

Lecturing/ Sermonizing

Many times a student will ask a question as a means of trying to start a conversation. Giving a student a lecture or a sermon about what should or should not happen will prevent more important concerns of the student from surfacing. Asking "Why do you want to know?" before or after answering the question usually helps the student express more directly what is on his mind. Obviously, answering questions is important, but the teacher should be sensitive to the students who use question-asking as a means of making contact.

Examples:

"Don't you know that the happiest people are those who spend time with their families?"

"You must be more friendly to people in order to have more friends."

"Smoking will only cause you problems."

Interpreting/ Analysing

Adolescents are especially sensitive to others' attempts to analyse their behavior. If an attempt is made, they will, as would many adults, close the door to further communication. Even if a student asks, "Why do you think I did that?" or "Tell me what's wrong with me?" it is generally best to avoid giving them an answer. It would be more appropriate to say, "Let's talk about that. What do you think about what you did?" or "I could try to guess, but you know yourself better than anyone. What do you think?"

Examples:

"You're being immature."

"You are afraid to do your homework because you have an inferiority complex."

"Not studying is really a way to punish your mother."

The most basic way of communicating is being yourself. Many times teachers feel pressured to put on a mask and play the role of "teacher". Such role-playing usually leads students to play similar games. If the student can trust the teacher, he will feel more confident to talk and express himself freely, thereby making communication more satisfying.

Conclusions

The major points covered in this paper were:

1. Adolescence does not, by definition, involve psychopathology.

2. If an adolescent has emotional or behavioral problems, one must look for family conflicts, problems with the peer group, or difficulties managing the stresses found in life, rather than simply thinking "it's only a phase".

3. The important psychosocial tasks of adolescents include:

    a) accepting one's physique and sexual role,

    b) establishing new peer relationships,

    c) attaining emotional independence,

    d) acquiring socially responsible behavior,

    e) building values which are harmonious with the environment.

4. Common problems during adolescence include alienation, identity confusion, and the development of a negative identity.

5. Teachers are advised to:

    a) Set an example for the students.

    b) Establish and maintain appropriate classroom limits.

    c) Provide the adolescent with a wide range for his emotional expression within acceptable limits.

    d) Provide the adolescent every opportunity for independence and individuality.

    e) Learn to listen to and communicate effectively with the adolescent.

This paper by no means presents an exhaustive discussion of the dynamics of adolescence. It does offer the teacher a basis for understanding the world of the adolescent student, and hopefully some advice for working with him.

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