

Is It Time to Reconsider the Notion of ‘Adolescence’?

Could we perhaps get further dealing with the problems of adolescents if we got rid of the whole notion of adolescence?

Clearly, it's a fairly recent notion . . . of having a separate time of life, almost a separate group of people, age 12 to 19.

Before the early 1900s there was childhood and adulthood. There were big transitions to be made in growing-up, of course. But young people did move into the adult world without this stage in-between: no longer children, but not yet treated as adults . . . behaving like adults but not given serious work to do; expected basically to “go to school”.

After the 19th century, when children were treated so badly, there was an understandable impulse to give them a real childhood free from work. Less defensible, perhaps, is the belief that prolonging childhood is a good thing in itself.

This institution – adolescence – is now in serious trouble.

Some rethinking was visible when Theodore Sizer's colleagues and friends gathered at Brown University to commemorate his lifetime of work with young people. Planned for months, it took place less than two weeks after the shootings at Columbine High School touched off a national discussion about “what's gone wrong?”.

Sizer was a young dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education; then headmaster of Phillips Andover, then the author of the ‘Horace’ books about high schools, then head of the Annenberg Institute at Brown. Today he and his wife are co-principals of a charter school in Devens MA.

His friends are people who've devoted their lives to helping kids by changing schools; to developing smaller schools, in which kids become secure adults, devoted to the idea that the object of education is to teach young people to use their minds well.

Some important things were said, that suggest the question is partly what (good) school is; but partly, too, whether formal education ought to be the only route to advancement for youth.

“Adults have disappeared from the lives of adolescents,” said Deborah Meier, founder of the Central Park East school in New York City. “We have deliberately created (schools) in which it is impossible for adults to know kids well. Kids know no one but their peers. And all this gets worse the closer kids get to adulthood.”

“We have created a separate society for adolescents,” said Sheldon White, professor of psychology at Harvard. Adolescence – not even a concept until about 100 years ago – was a coming-together of the child-labor laws, the new high schools and the special legislation for juvenile offenses.

“In whose interest was adolescence invented?”, someone asked.

White said: “We assumed it was in the public interest to get kids out of the workforce. Maybe this ought to be reappraised. Maybe we ought to re-invent child labor.”

Young people do work, as someone pointed out. But not so they can advance: They work so they can be marketed-to, as consumers. Adolescence did also create millions of jobs for adult professionals: social workers, teachers, others; as White noted.

To get a perspective on the current notion that education-is-the-only-way-up you really have to go back in history. Look, for example, at what Paul Johnson, a British popular historian, wrote in The Birth of the Modern about what was accomplished in the years after 1815 by people who came from truly disadvantaged backgrounds, who went to work early and who had almost no formal education.

- o Michael Faraday, the scientist, “was born poor, the son of a Yorkshire blacksmith. He had no education other than a few years at a school for the poor, but as a bookbinder’s apprentice he read the works he bound . . .”

- o John Otley, the geologist, “had no education apart from village schooling and set up as a basket-maker.

- o James Naysmith, the engineer, “started as an apprentice coach painter. His son, James, inventor of the steam hammer, made a brass cannon at the age of nine.”

- o Henry Maudsley, ‘perhaps the greatest of all the machine-tool ins, began work at 12 as a powder-monkey in a cartridge works.”

- o Matthew Murray, “the great engine designer, began as a kitchen boy and butler. Richard Roberts, brilliant inventor of power looms, was a shoemaker’s son, had virtually no education and began as a quarry laborer. John Kennedy, the first great builder of iron ships, was another poor Scot who received no schooling except in summer and started as a carpenter’s boy.”

In Longitude Dava Sobel tells the story of John Harrison who solved “the greatest scientific problem of his time”. He invented a clock that would carry the true time from the home port, to anywhere in the world. Harrison had no formal education and no apprenticeship to any watchmaker.

In The Maritime History of Massachusetts Samuel Eliot Morison writes about Mary Patten, wife of the captain of a clipper ship. “In 1858 on a voyage around Cape Horn, her husband fell ill. The first mate was in irons for insubordination; the second mate was ignorant of navigation. Mrs. Patten had made herself mistress of the art of navigation during a previous voyage. She took command, and for 52 days she navigated the ship of 1800 tons, tending her husband the while, and took both safely into San Francisco”. She was 19.

It was a time when new fields of activity provided opportunities for young people to get serious responsibilities early, and to rise as rapidly as their abilities and energies would take them. They did amazing things. Some of their roads, bridges and other public works still stand in England, still in use.

Are we to believe that these abilities have been lost, in young people today? Or is our society simply failing to let young people have, early, the responsibilities and opportunities to achieve?

Sadly, Johnson recounts, even in the 19th century adults soon took away the opportunities for young people. Crafts, guilds and unions “set up barriers to the self-advancement of able poor youths”, using requirement for apprenticeships and credentials to protect jobs for themselves.

A principal device has been to prolong schooling; to build the notion that young people learn only in school, and to make education the only route to advancement: a high school diploma, then a college degree, now graduate work.

Several problems within the institution of ‘school’ make this discrimination even worse against certain young people.

- o Schools, especially in the suburbs, are far too large. Big buildings hold down average-cost-per-student, and produce teams that win championships. But taxes and championships are largely adult interests, not student interests. Too many kids can’t participate; end up isolated.Sizer and others have long argued for schools of a size such that every student is needed.

- o Too often in school ‘ability’ is defined as intelligence that is abstract, conceptual, verbal. But a third or more of people have aptitudes that are spatial, tactile, visual.

Too often people with this latter aptitude are set down as ‘not smart’; told they are “not college material”. Their careers are blocked; their talents wasted.

o College is expensive. But public support cannot flow just to needy students: The public universities want the money appropriated to institutions. There of course it pays for students who can afford to pay as well as for students who cannot. This cuts off still more low-income youth from formal education.

It is heresy today to question the idea of education as the route to advancement. Yet the whole idea of an adolescence removed from adult responsibility and real life may have become a wrong-idea. A idea is not right simply because it is widely-held.

We should consider: Is any class of persons in America today so systematically discriminated-against as young people?