

The Adolescent in the Mirror

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Kids rise or fall according to what we believe about them.

—*Lise Eliot, Pink Brain, Blue Brain*¹

That one has a jail cell with his name on it.

—*School staff member describing a fifth grader in
Ann Arnett Ferguson's Bad Boys: Public Schools
in the Making of Black Masculinity*²

On the first day of my adolescent development course, I often ask my students—master's degree candidates or upper-level undergraduates interested in teaching—to imagine a hall of funhouse mirrors. Some of those mirrors make us look taller or shorter; some, wider or narrower. Some show us pretty much what we expect to see; others wildly distort parts of our bodies from what we think they should look like. Whatever the effect, the shape of each mirror affects the way we see ourselves and—at least in the moment—how we feel about the image we see reflected back at us.

This thought experiment is admittedly simplistic, but I use it as a metaphor for the way adolescents are influenced all day, every day, by the interactions they have with their families, with their peers, with society, and—most significantly for the purposes of this book—with their teachers and in their schools. As neuroscientist Lise Eliot wrote in her book *Pink Brain, Blue Brain*, the experiences children have every day influence not only their

self-images but even the way their brains develop, from as early as birth. According to Eliot, many of these experiences can influence whether students “rise or fall” based on messages that teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, or other adults subtly—or sometimes not so subtly—communicate to them about who they are.

Whereas Eliot’s research highlights the ways minuscule differences in the brains of male and female babies are magnified through heavily gendered cultural conditioning throughout childhood and adolescence, Ann Arnett Ferguson’s *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* illustrates how the messages students receive about themselves at school can have not only gendered but also racial overtones. Ferguson relates many formal and informal interviews she conducted with students, parents, teachers, and school staff as part of her ethnographic research at an urban school, including one discussion with a school staff member about a black, male fifth grader. “That one has a jail cell with his name on it,” the staff member says, to Ferguson’s shock, as the student walks by them in the hall. The boy doesn’t hear the comment, but it prompts Ferguson to wonder what other messages this student, barely on the verge of adolescence, receives every day that influence his sense of himself, his place at school, and his likely future.

Since the first edition of *Adolescents at School* was published in 2003, this book has been used in schools and teacher education programs across the US and abroad. Its main purpose is to help educators, whether they are already working in schools or studying to become teachers, understand some of the ways that issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, social class, faith, ability/disability—and all the intersections across these categories—influence adolescents’ lives and, in turn, their experiences at school. What emerges from the chapters that follow are not *answers* to the problems our students might face; those are as enigmatic and individual as the students themselves. Rather, the purpose of the book is to help educators develop a *repertoire of questions*, an informed capacity to reflect on the cultural forces that might be contributing to a student’s disengagement, or resistance, or poor performance on tests, or fear of failure—and, just as importantly, on the factors that might contribute to their success and thriving. I believe that asking the right questions about our students is an essential first step toward developing student-teacher relationships that can foster a sense of possibility, such that students can grasp the full range of their potential both as scholars and as future adults.

BEGINNING WITH IDENTITY

Along with asking students to reflect on the hall-of-mirrors metaphor, I devote the first session of my adolescent development course to exploring with students the concept of *identity*, a term that is both critical for understanding the adolescent experience and virtually impossible to define. Adolescence is a time when a perfect storm of forces—cognitive changes, puberty, greater awareness of social roles, sexual activity, stronger peer networks, and the need to develop future academic and career plans—converges toward what child and adolescent psychology pioneer Erik Erikson (whose theories are echoed throughout this book) called the central “crisis,” or turning point, of identity development.³ Thankfully, as Erikson noted, much of this development happens subconsciously, yet young people are also acutely aware of many aspects of their cultural world—both school, peer, and family cultures and the larger society in which they live—that frame their conceptions of themselves.

Certainly, this kind of “meta-reflection”—the viewing of ourselves through the lens of what others reflect back to us—is one of the key aspects of identity development. This reflexivity, however, is much more complex than my simple hall-of-mirrors exercise captures. As Erikson describes in his classic 1968 book, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, the reflection involved in identity development is both multidirectional and constantly shifting and changing:

If we should now pause and state a few minimum requirements for fathoming the complexity of identity we should have to begin by saying something like this (and let us take our time in saying it): in psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him.⁴

Erikson’s description of identity formation—which I believe he writes in a deliberately circular and convoluted manner to underscore its dynamic nature—comes into clearer focus when considered from the perspective of an individual adolescent. If we think of the aforementioned student from Ferguson’s *Bad Boys*, for example, we might ask how that fifth grader,

already marked by some adults at his school as having a jail cell in his future, “judges himself in light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him.” How does this student’s self-concept, based on what others see in him, affect his behavior, and how does this behavior in turn reinforce the perceptions that teachers, school staff, and others have about him? Educators who work from an awareness of identity formation can help break this cycle. What would happen instead if teachers and other adults at this boy’s school reflected a different image back to him, one based not on his discipline record or on negative social stereotypes about young black males but instead on his intelligence, his potential, his passions, his promise? And how might this foster a more positive relationship between this student and school and, quite possibly, set in motion a more positive trajectory for his future?

These are the kinds of questions I hope educators will reflect on as they read about all the students profiled in this book, whether they are black, brown, or white; male, female, or nonbinary; gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, or questioning; transgender or cisgender; US-born or recently emigrated; living or not living with a disability; coming from low-income homes or from families with significant economic privilege. For today’s adolescents, identity development undeniably occurs in a climate of cultural racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and a host of other negative social forces that Erikson could barely have imagined. Yet the various chapters of this book are aimed at much more than mere consciousness-raising about these various “isms.” Rather, the authors herein explore how these forces work their way into the cultures of schools and into the thinking of adolescents themselves, often limiting their self-concepts and academic performance. In addition, the authors illuminate the various ways educators can work to redirect students’ learning experiences and ways of thinking away from the false limitations these cultural forces might impose on them and toward a more expansive understanding of their true potential.

ADOLESCENCE AND THE HISTORICAL MOMENT

In the same chapter of *Identity: Youth and Crisis* just quoted, Erikson refers to identity development as happening both “in the core of the individual and in the core of his communal culture.”⁵ This means that every person who goes through adolescence does so in a particular place and at a unique

moment in history, both of which have a profound effect on their sense of who they are. Today's adolescents are the first generation in recent memory to have experienced a global pandemic and, as a result, a sudden and rapid shift to online learning. Moreover, the rise of social media and the dominance of the internet have created a vastly different world from the one in which their parents and teachers grew up. Recent research on the relationship between social media and adolescent self-esteem suggests that the effects on young people of being constantly "wired" can lead to a host of social and psychological issues.⁶ But social media is undeniably both highly influential in adolescents' lives and here to stay. Factors that psychologists have long written about as being closely connected to the development of a sense of identity in adolescence—friendship, communication, deep involvement in interests that help us define who we are—are still central to the adolescent experience, but they have been completely redefined in our digital age. Because of the internet and social media, we live in a time when adolescents are more vulnerable than ever to cultural messages about who they are, who they should be, and what is expected of them.

But social media and the internet also create opportunities for today's young people that didn't exist for those of us who grew up before the digital age, many of which can contribute positively to their identity development. For example, LGBTQ+ students who live in rural areas, where they might otherwise meet few (if any) young people like them, can now reach out online and know they are not alone. Undocumented immigrant students, who might otherwise believe there are no options available to them for going to college, can search the web for schools and scholarships where their undocumented status need not be a barrier to college attendance.

Also, today's youth can use social media and the internet to connect with activist movements both locally and nationally, and thus become involved in some of the critical issues that affect their lives and that speak to their identities. Whether it's a local or state human rights law or a national issue—such as police brutality against young men of color, sexual assault against women, or gun violence in schools—today's social media-oriented adolescents have ways to stay informed and involved in these issues through connections that literally change every minute. Harnessed in positive ways, social media can thus help facilitate the development of an adolescent's sense of agency and self-efficacy, both important contributors to positive identity development.

ABOUT ADOLESCENTS AT SCHOOL

Adolescents at School is a relatively simple title for a book about an exceedingly complex topic. Of course, any volume about the ways identity and culture affect middle and high school students will inevitably be incomplete, since there are infinite aspects of adolescent identity, infinite ways these can be influenced by culture, and infinite ways these can play out in academic environments. Rather than a comprehensive text on adolescent identity in the school context (which would be impossible to assemble), the book is an invitation to consider a range of related topics from a variety of perspectives.

Michael Nakkula's opening chapter, "Identity and Possibility," explores Erikson's adolescent identity development model through a profile of Mac, a fourteen-year-old who already feels in many ways that his identity is fixed and unchangeable. ("It's who I am, man. I can't change that.") Drawing on the opposing notions of *moratorium* (exploring a range of possibilities for oneself) and *foreclosure* (establishing a fixed sense of oneself without such exploration), Nakkula illustrates how the work of teachers and others engaged with adolescents is in many ways about "creating possibility"—helping young people develop ideas about themselves, their abilities, and their futures that they otherwise might not be able to imagine.⁷

The chapters that follow are devoted to specific aspects of identity that can have profound effects on adolescents' learning and school lives: race, ethnicity, immigrant status, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, social class, ability and disability, and spirituality. Though certainly not an exhaustive list of the factors that affect middle and high school students, these issues can play central roles in the development of their self-concepts, their social interactions with peers, their relationships with teachers and other adults, their goals and plans for the future, and their academic achievement. They also can be associated with the kind of identity foreclosure against which Nakkula warns. For example, if adolescents view themselves through societal prejudices about what it means to be African American or poor or gay or an immigrant, they may have difficulty realizing their full potential as learners.

In the book's final chapter, "Beyond Categories," John Raible and Sonia Nieto expand the framework for understanding adolescent identity, profiling three young people whose lives represent the intersection of multiple identities and experiences. As with the adolescents featured throughout the book, these young people demonstrate how factors such as race, gender,

sexual orientation, class, and ethnicity—though extremely useful for understanding aspects of an adolescent’s experience—tell only part of the story, the remainder of which is unique to each individual.

Like the youth and issues about which they write, the contributors to *Adolescents at School* are a diverse group. The researchers, educators, counselors, and education journalists represented here shed light on adolescents’ lives from multiple vantage points and use a variety of approaches. Commentaries, youth profiles, and research features complement the longer chapters and provide additional perspectives on the issues raised in them. In many cases, authors draw on the voices of youth themselves, citing the “real authorities” on the adolescent experience in interview excerpts, anecdotes, case studies, and samples of student writing.

What’s New in This Third Edition

In addition to extensive updates and revisions to chapters carried over from the second edition, this edition of *Adolescents at School* includes six new chapters that address issues of concern to contemporary adolescents and the educators who work with them.

New chapters by Judy Y. Chu and Lisa Machoian address gender socialization—how our culture “scripts” young people into various roles according to what is expected of boys and girls in contemporary society. Both authors explore the implications for schooling and make recommendations for how educators can help young people resist restrictive gender scripts and find their authentic voices.

Two additional new chapters by Selcuk R. Sirin and by William Perez, Maria Melendrez, and Roberta Espinoza profile two populations of adolescents who can face special challenges in twenty-first-century schools and society: Muslim-American youth and undocumented students, respectively. These authors highlight the ways discrimination and stereotyping can affect these students’ identity development as well as how educators can help foster their success.

Finally, the authors of two new commentaries speak to issues that are crucial for teachers and administrators to consider in their work. Barbara Applebaum’s “Teaching While White” explores why it’s important for white teachers, especially those teaching in predominantly white settings, to teach about race. And Carolyn Cummings Perrucci’s “Income Inequality, Youth Identity, and Future Life Trajectories” highlights the complexities of social class in contemporary America and how teachers can support students by

helping them break through the invisible ceiling that socioeconomic status often threatens to impose on them.

FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

Michael Nakkula and Eric Toshalis, authors of the book *Understanding Youth* (and both contributors to this volume), have suggested that adolescent educators approach their work as “applied developmentalists,” basing their interactions with students and their professional decisions on a keen understanding of the complex interplay among youth identity development, culture, and schooling.⁸ These and other authors of *Adolescents at School* offer numerous practical ideas in this vein. Whether it’s creating curriculum that honors the diverse identities of students, building classroom communities that help students discover their common humanity, grouping students in ways that encourage them to work together across difference, designing assessments that not only evaluate students but also help them discover a sense of personal voice, or linking students to social movements aligned with their interests and passions, the contributors share many practical strategies that illustrate what teaching from an applied developmentalist perspective might look day-to-day.

Like all generations before them, today’s young people are coming of age at their own unique historical moment, one that has a profound influence on the very notion of what it means to be an adolescent. This doesn’t mean, however, that the adults who interact with them at school cannot relate to or reach them. As much as adolescence has changed over the years, one thing has remained constant. All adolescents strive to connect with others and to feel a positive sense of who they are. The task of identity development is, and probably always will be, central to the “work” of being an adolescent and, therefore, to the work of educators as well.

NOTES

1. Lise Eliot, *Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow into Troublesome Gaps—and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Mariner, 2009), 15.
2. Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 1.
3. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968). Erikson’s work has been widely criticized by later psychological theorists, particularly feminist and relational psychologists, for presenting normative adolescent development largely in male, white, middle-class, heterosexual terms.

4. Erikson, *Identity*, 22–23.
5. Erikson, *Identity*, 22.
6. See, for example, Lauren A. Spies Shapiro and Gayla Margolin, “Growing Up Wired: Social Networking Sites and Adolescent Psychosocial Development,” *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 17, no. 1 (2014): 1–18.
7. Erikson, *Identity*; James E. Marcia, “Development and Validation of Ego Identity Status,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3, no. 5 (1966): 551–58.
8. Michael J. Nakkula and Eric Toshalis, *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006).