

RE-THINKING ADOLESCENCE

Educators, parents and policy makers are likely to hold similar views about what constitutes healthy development in young children and the conditions under which it is most likely to occur. The disagreements that do arise tend to be about what public policy responses are required, for example, childcare provision and tax credits for families. The same is not true for that period of human development known as adolescence. Many different and often conflicting ideas inform both public policy and private practice when it comes to the transition from childhood to adulthood. Generally in Canada, young people can leave school, drive and marry at 16, vote and serve in the armed forces at 18, and drink alcohol at 19. On average, young people reach puberty earlier, stay in their parents' homes longer, and form families later than a generation ago. If we believe these traditional markers of adulthood remain valid, then society has either developed a new period of pre-adulthood or lengthened adolescence.

Social and economic conditions explain this phenomenon, but they offer little guidance about how the institutions that serve young people should respond. Has the need for higher levels of education simply resulted in a prolonged exposure to traditional ideas of schooling? Just as the development of young children results from the complex interaction of biology and experience, so too does the transition from childhood to adulthood. Can we do a better job of providing experiences that support that transition?

There is ample evidence that young people want to make meaningful contributions to their communities and to a larger society – even at a global level. They seek autonomy and direction over their own lives. Around the world we see the enormous capacity of children and youth in many difficult and troubling situations – from the orphans of HIV/AIDS who care for siblings to those involved in the international effort to eradicate child labour and those working on local issues of environmental degradation.

In the last issue of *Education Canada*, Doug Willms and Patrick Flanagan described a “curious paradox” among Canadian adolescents: internationally, they rank near the top on achievement tests but 15th in their sense of belonging at school and 29th in student participation. About 11 percent of adolescent learners experience anxiety and depression with rates of depression higher in the secondary grades.¹ How can this be? Given what we know about their capacity, wouldn't we expect that, as young people mature into adulthood, they would grow in confidence and competence and be looking forward with hope and optimism about the benefits that adulthood brings?

Robert Epstein offers a powerful and compelling explanation based on studies of American youth.² He argues that adolescence is a largely western concept that ‘infantilizes’ young people and deprives them of responsibility for decisions and actions they are quite capable of managing. He describes a generation of young people without meaningful access to the community of adults – a group in waiting, hanging out with each other in school, in the malls and in cyberspace – in essence, young people without any immediate purpose.

References to the need to reconnect young people to the community of adults abound. Inclusive Cities Canada proposes that young people should gain the municipal vote at age 16.³ The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement involves young people as actors rather than simply subjects in research relevant to their lives. Youth led non-government organizations are increasingly common, and youth entrepreneurship in private enterprise is not unusual. Student engagement has assumed prominence in education as evidence mounts that participation in extra-curricular activities, involvement in student governance and engagement in social or community causes make a difference. Young people know the importance of education and want to learn. They need a curriculum that demonstrates relevance to their lives by focusing on important questions, teachers who know and respect them as people, and relief from premature judgments about their intentions, interests and abilities. They need to be co-designers of their own educational experiences, including curriculum and assessment.

In the fall of 2007 the Canadian Education Association, in collaboration with the Canadian Council on Learning, will launch an ambitious research and development initiative, *What did you do in school today?*⁴ Participating school districts, schools and students will be able to examine more closely the relationships among classroom learning activities, levels of achievement, and student well being. |

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Resources

- *Imagine a School... DVD*. 2007. Canadian Education Association. www.cea-ace.ca
- *What Kids Can Do*. www.whatkidscando.org
- *Centre for Excellence in Youth Engagement* <http://www.engagementcentre.ca/vision.php>
- *Inclusive Cities Canada* www.inclusivocities.ca
- *A Call to Action for Adolescent Learners* http://www.cea-ace.ca/media/CEA_Call_to_Action_EN.pdf
- Robert Epstein. *The Myth of the Teen Brain*, *Scientific American Mind*, April/May 2007).
- *21st Century Learning Initiative* <http://www.21learn.org>

Note: Robert Epstein's book, *The Case Against Adolescence*, will be reviewed in the next issue of *Education Canada*.

Notes

- 1 J. Douglas Willms and Patrick Flanagan, “Canadian Students ‘Tell Them From Me,’” *Education Canada* 47, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 46-50.
- 2 Robert Epstein, *The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen* (Quill Driver Books, 2007).
- 3 Peter Clutterbuck, Christa Freiler and Marvin Novick. *Meeting the Civic Challenges of Social Inclusion: Cross-Canada Findings and Priorities for Action* (Inclusive Cities Canada, 2005). <http://www.inclusivocities.ca/pdf/MeetingCivicChallenges.pdf>
- 4 For more information contact Christa Freiler, Director of Research at cfreiler@cea-ace.ca