

MORE RIGHTS FOR TEENS? A PROVOCATIVE ARGUMENT

A REVIEW OF *THE CASE AGAINST ADOLESCENCE: REDISCOVERING THE ADULT IN EVERY TEEN* BY ROBERT EPSTEIN.

QUILL DRIVER BOOKS. 2007. ISBN 188495670X

Robert Epstein postulates that “American-style” adolescence is an historical anomaly constructed at the turn of the last century as a result of the social changes caused by industrialization, not always with benevolent motives. He asserts that, “In what appears to be a vicious cycle of cause and effect, teen turmoil since the late 1800’s has generated a large number of unique laws that restrict teen behavior in ways that adult behavior has never been restricted, and these laws appear to have stimulated more extreme forms of ‘misbehavior’ in teens” (p. 23). It is the thesis of this provocative book that, “Teens need to be judged (a) as individuals, not as a group, (b) based on their competencies, not on their age, (c) based on their potential for learning and growth, not merely on their current characteristics, and (d) without disparaging labels like ‘adolescent,’ which imply limits or flaws” (p. 16). Epstein believes that teens should individually be granted rights ranging from employment to marriage, and released from compulsory school attendance, whenever they demonstrate the necessary competencies rather than at any arbitrarily defined age.

The explanation and defense of this thesis is logically presented and research based, but also rife with debatable assertions and unexamined questions. It is probably inevitable that such a bold and far-reaching challenge to conventional wisdom would both stimulate defensive response and provide ample fodder for anyone bent on critique. However, while such weaknesses and oversights should be challenged, to focus exclusively on them is to risk missing the potential benefits of the author’s unique perspective and intriguing question. Is it true that, “Teen problems in the United States are caused by a host of factors related to the artificial extension of childhood: poor role models (peers and media icons), peer pressure, isolation from adults and conflict with parents, mandatory schooling, a lack of control over their lives, and so on” (p. 123)? Are we subjecting our youth to “infantilization” by expecting too little of, and giving too little responsibility to, them? Would adolescents quickly rise to the challenge if treated more like adults?

Much of the discussion in this book is illuminating for educators, particularly its historical review of the emergence of the concept of adolescence and its examination of how intellectual ability and moral reasoning develop. However, it touches on education per se only incidentally. When it does, it is provocative. After Kindergarten, “regimentation continues throughout our school years, effectively shutting down creative expression in all but a few misfits whom the system can’t manage to socialize” (p. 160). “Denied a wide range of adult challenges, American teens may be developing their intelligence in narrow ways, determined largely by the artificial boundaries of the classroom” (p. 174). Epstein’s proposal for the educational emancipation of adolescents is that, “Segregation by age should be ended; emphasis should be put on satisfying individual instructional needs; more home- and internet-based instruction should be available, as well as more options for testing out of courses or degree programs; the minimum age of school leaving should be reduced substantially; education should be spread over one’s lifetime, as needed and desired” (p. 323).

The author’s fundamental thesis that adolescents can, and should, be given more freedom and responsibility for their learning resonates with John Abbott’s proposals to correct the “upside down and inside out” nature of traditional school systems by having secondary students learn more independently so as to focus increased resources on earlier grades.¹ It also implies a stronger voice for students, particularly adolescents, who “are capable of making great contributions to society, but they currently have virtually no way of being heard” (p. 13), which is consistent with Doug Willms attempts to provide continuous student feedback as the basis for school improvement and reform.² Many similar connections can be made. Consequently, although it is not about education, this book would be a useful ancillary text to broaden the discussion on secondary school reform and should be of interest to anyone who is curious about it.

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The Case Against Adolescence is questionable as a prescription, but it is enormously valuable as a provocation and well worth reading, if only for the ‘knock on the side of the head’ that it provides and the questioning that results for all those who seek to better understand adolescents’ experiences, needs and potentials. |

BRUCE BEAIRSTO is Superintendent of Schools in Richmond, British Columbia, a member of the editorial board of Education Canada, and a regular contributor to the Book Review department.

Notes

- 1 See policy paper for *The 21st Century Learning Initiative* at <http://www.21learn.org/publ/PP.pdf>
- 2 See *Tell Them From Me* at <http://www.thelearningbar.com/ttfm/main.php>

