

Exploring the 'Cusp Culture' Helps Adolescents Navigate the Way to Adulthood

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During my more than 28 years of teaching, I often heard from non-teaching acquaintances that my work was not part of the "real world." When discussing some issue about schools in general or about specific issues in teaching and learning, someone would say, "Well, in the real world ... " then expound on the "realities" of their work, all the while belittling the educational arena. In my early years of teaching, I resigned myself to these conversations, having been somewhat cowed into believing that maybe these people were right—that teaching was such a specialized field it was like spending nine or ten hours a day in a foreign land (fortunately an interesting and enjoyable one).

By mid-career, however, I was granted the insight to see that teaching was closer to the real world than almost any other profession. U.S. teachers, at least, are exposed every day to the American culture through their requisite reading, through their necessary contacts with society by way of parents, businesses and community groups, and most of all through their students. In almost no other profession are workers plunged into an obligatory understanding of local and national politics, a neighborhood's human needs and suffering, health and employment issues, family anxieties of all kinds, tax and budget concerns, and a daily dose of national and international current events, contemporary music, up-to-the-minute slang, dress, and who's who among that day's heroes.

Now, however, after thirty-seven years in education, I can see that there was some accuracy in the thinking of those who denied "real world" status to teachers. I still firmly believe that no one is closer to the overall American culture than teachers; but I can also see that teachers are at the same time spending nine or ten (or eleven and twelve) hours working if not in a foreign land at least with what could be described as a foreign culture. This is particularly true in the middle school.

Parents and families of young adolescents will recognize what I am talking about. Ten to fifteen year olds are often in their own world and are steeped in a culture alien to us. We may have thought that we knew these individuals quite well; then, one unforgettable day, a complete stranger shows up at breakfast or in the front row at school. Younger children are so much a part of the familial culture that it is easy to see them as extensions of their families in terms of interests, belief systems, and general lifestyle. Older high school students, on the other hand, have gained enough individuality to make increasingly better (and more culturally appropriate) decisions about family, friends, life choices. So elementary and high school educators may not experience much difficulty in connecting with these age groups in spite of their foreignness. Middle schoolers, though, seem to be in a no-earthling's-land. The result is that their language, dress, thought processes, interests, social behaviors, and even day-to-day physical appearance range from the unfamiliar to the curious to the exotic—often in a few moments' time. At the same time, the middle schoolers themselves are strangers in what is suddenly a strange land—and they know it. Psychologists tell us that this happens at various times in our lives: two-year-olds experience it; second graders; nineteen-year-olds; adults experiencing mid-life changes. But more than two-year-olds or primary students, young adolescents fret over their changed status. No doubt, older teens and adults may rely on their inner resources and a cadre of close friends to get them through their passage, but middle schoolers' inner resources are not yet fully developed and their friends cannot always be counted on as support—besides, their classmates are going through the same troubling times!

Like visitors to a new country, middle schoolers are intensely curious about everything in this new place called early adolescence, yet they are hesitant to be a part of it by themselves. They are timid in the face of so many differences from their childhood environment but enchanted at the same time. They always feel better when they can hang out with people who are like them; they develop their own language; they devise their own dress code which is a mix of the new world and the uniqueness of their group. They develop a habit of not listening to persons outside of their group because they figure that whatever is being said is not a concept they will be able to understand or need to understand just then. Some have been thrust so quickly into this new country that they've come unprepared, and they're not able to grasp the parameters of the new land's behavioral norms or keep up with the rules of the culture. Sometimes they make up their own rules or simply deny the possibility that they might be making mistakes (it works in their culture). Needless to say, they are far from achieving citizenship in the adult world. I say, therefore, that at no time in a person's life are parents and families more important. What is the real world? Believe me, the world of early adolescence is real to them—sometimes harshly so. Many ten-to-fifteen year olds go through a time of being amoral, which is to say that in the face of peer pressure, the possibility of losing a privilege or being blamed or punished has almost no value. Looking stupid or weak in front of someone is a worse consequence to a young adolescent than whatever punishment might occur as a result of shop lifting, lying or sneaking out. During their middle school years, young people come to understand that sometimes "wrong" choices bring good consequences and "right" choices bring what seem to the young person to be bad consequences. The desire for belonging and acceptance from one's peers is sometimes so overwhelming in a young adolescent's life that he or she will defy even the most closely-held values of childhood. To their surprise, intentions are suddenly no longer acceptable, and the "I didn't mean to!" garners no support. It becomes urgent that parents, guardians, teachers (also coaches, members of the clergy, etc.) learn how to connect with these young adolescent outlanders. To do so, of course, they must understand the immensely variable yet amazingly common needs of this age group. They must be willing to be patient and gently introduce the young persons into their new world. Most of all, they need to appreciate the culture middle schoolers create among themselves. Like good anthropologists, those who deal with middle schoolers must be careful to acquaint themselves with the young adolescent culture, all the while using language cues, modeling behavior, games and humor to gradually introduce the young persons to the adult society of which they long to be a part. In this process, enlist the natural leaders in the young person's culture; be willing to spend time listening; make yourself aware of the broader picture of the ten- to fifteen- year-old world; and be prepared to adjust to what seems to be a changling: an indecisive, inarticulate creature who switches into a sophisticated, take-charge entity, then back to the glob again—at a moment's notice.

Visitors to a foreign land, young adolescents feel insecure and lack confidence in their abilities. Spend time letting them know what their gifts are. Assure them that although their world is in constant flux, you are steadfast—and be steadfast. Make school and home those places where they truly belong, where they can be themselves, where mistakes can be allowed as long as one learns from them. Share with them the language and values of adulthood; the value of discipline, hard work, service, family, self.

Be certain that school is not just a preparation for a future world but a place where one can truly practice what one is learning; reading to the blind or writing to the mayor, using math to assist the school in ordering supplies or assessing the output of the electric lights in the building, making technological connections with real people who are part of the country in the text—in other words, using what they are learning in class to do what adults do.

While they may or may not enjoy being explorers in their new culture, I don't believe that there is any age group that wants more to be a part of the society of grown ups than young adolescents. Little children

inherently understand their privileged status; older teens already see the demands and responsibilities of the adult world they are about to join. Middle schoolers though, know that they don't want to be children any longer—or in any case their shoe size and hormones tell them they can't—yet they don't know enough about the duties and liabilities grown ups face. This is the perfect time to enable middle schoolers to practice being adults, to help these strangers in our schools and homes become part of the world they long for even as they are sticking out their tongues at it.

In the end our task as teachers and parents is to create a kind of engaged coexistence between the two worlds of early adolescence and adulthood. To do this, we are invited to appreciate the middle school world which is a place of routine change and challenge. We must be open to the the superior facets of the young adolescent world—their idealism, social concern, disdain for hypocrisy, and a sometimes-aggravating ability to make us laugh at the incongruities of our daily lives. But we should also make sure that they are constantly exposed to the best of the adult world—the advantages of planning ahead, of resisting peer pressure, of applying oneself to learning, the joys of kindness and respect for others, and the freedom of knowing that not everyone is looking at us all the time.

For those of us who daily engage with these wonderful strangers, what is is what's real. There is no benefit in longing for the return of these middle schoolers' lost childhood nor in thrusting them too soon into an already-too-long adolescence. Let us daily tighten our powers of appreciation for this age group, this cusp culture. Their clothing, their lingo, their music, and their silliness will pass; what we are working to retain is their creativity, their humor, their willingness to help, their ability to accept challenges, and that remarkable energy that manifests itself in unending tapping, picking and poking now but—for those who have had a safe and satisfying passage through early adolescence—could one day be used to change the world.

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