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not a  
stage!

*A Critical Re-Conception of  
Young Adolescent Education*

# Introduction

## Being a Bit Disruptive

Mark D. Vagle

For over half a century, it has been commonplace—natural, an “of course”—for those who focus on the education of young adolescents to draw on developmental psychology and, in particular, the accompanying “developmental stages” which have served—and continue to serve—as the dominant conception of young adolescent growth and change. Although stage developmentalism has brought attention to the needs of young adolescents in the name of developmental responsiveness, it also has proceeded without careful enough consideration of critical theoretical perspectives regarding issues related to power, interest, agency, gender, race, class, culture and so on. The primary purpose of this edited volume is to help *re-orient* the discourse on young adolescent growth and change and in turn *re-conceptualize* the education of young adolescents.

To those who are skeptical (for any and all possible reasons) of these sort of re-orienting and re-conceptualizing projects, I want to make clear, from the start, a set of assumptions that I have about such work.

**Assumption #1:** Re-conceptualizing knowledge, assumptions, structures, theories, ideas, philosophies, goals, aspirations, practices—to name a few—is a given. That is, I assume all scholars and practitioners in any and all fields (disciplines) should always be re-conceptualizing what they do. Although I realize this could be read as a naïve statement of the obvious, I think the obvious must be tended to and opened up. This volume might, in part then, be read as an opening up of at least one of the most *vexingly obvious* aspects of what we should be doing in fields of study—*constantly re-conceptualizing them*.

**Assumption #2:** Building off the first assumption, such re-conceptualizing should not only be reserved for matters related to application or implementation of theories, ideas, philosophies, and the like (which, in my opinion, receive the most attention because they are the most readily accessible), but also for the very foundational theories, ideas, and philosophies themselves. This is important because the theories, ideas, and philosophies are often woven through the fabric of our applications and implementations. Some-

times they are woven so tightly, that we cannot see or feel their influence on our actions, language, questions, and answers. It is only when we scratch and gnaw at them a bit that we can see how they are working on (framing, constraining, limiting, allowing) our actions and implementations. This volume might also, then, be described as a *scratching, gnawing* text.

**Assumption #3:** This also means that I assume gnawing and scratching will take place between you (the reader) and this text. I sincerely want the ideas forwarded in this volume to be poked, prodded, and wrestled with. I want it to serve as a discursive space where ideas are played with in a seriously thoughtful way. Finally, then, this volume might be read as a *playful* text.

## Situating the Contingent, Recursive

Guided by these particular assumptions, this volume is designed to incite a discourse around young adolescent growth and change. At the close of her powerful book, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, Nancy Lesko (2001) calls for alternative (to developmentalism and socialization) conceptions of growth and change. She writes:

I think that if we assumed that growth and change are *contingent*, we would need to specify the contingencies and that would lead us to examine and document multiple microcontexts. I also think that a conception of growth and change as *recursive*, as occurring over and over as we move into new situations, would reorient us. Rather than the assumption of cumulative and one-way development that is now in place in both science and popular culture, a recursive view of growth and change directs us to look at local contexts and specific actions of young people, without the inherent evaluation of steps, stages, and socialization. (pp. 195-96)

Breaking free of dominant discourses (such as stage developmentalism) is no simple task—as per their dominant nature, it is difficult to imagine different discourses without using the dominant as (at the very least) a reference point, and more likely as the very rubric by which all conceptions are judged. The task, then, requires a critical theoretical approach—that is, it requires an approach that aims to disrupt norms on both the individual and social level. One must carefully watch both the larger social matters that constrain some things and make other things possible. Such a project needs an approach that sees who ends up privileged and who ends up mar-

ginalized—and examines the social conditions that made (and continue to make) this happen.

Critical theorists have been committed to this work, as Pinar (2009) states, for over 40 years. Although Pinar recognizes what motivates critical theorists (pedagogues), he is concerned that there is an assumed ideological freedom in which critical folks do not critique their own ideologies. For Pinar, this will always limit what can be accomplished using critical theory. He writes:

what stultifies the educational Left is not only the reproduction of power 'outside' but also within us, the incapacity to imagine resistance against ourselves and with others.... Without subjective reconstruction of one's own ideological interpellation (subjugation in Butler's parlance) the split-off 'I' asserts itself as a unitary context-free cohesive self, reserving for itself the agency evidently eluding everyone else. (p. 193)

Though I find Pinar's critique a bit sharp, I do not want this critical project to fall into the same trap. I want for this text to be read as a critically oriented project in which the critical theory that is put to use is also marked by a healthy dose of humility (Vagle, 2011). This project is meant to be both an advocacy and a contemplation. It is a contemplation of ourselves as humans who are growing and changing as young adolescents are growing and changing; a contemplation of how power and agency circulate through all relations; a contemplation of how developmental frames of growth and change provide the very rules of the playground and are enacted in particular micro-contexts by living, breathing human beings.

In this book, the problem of preserving "young adolescence" is described as a reification of dominant, oppressive structures—it needs to be disrupted, yet also needs to be the starting point. This seeming contradiction is one of many that will be taken up, debated, considered, amplified—but not settled. In fact, this book is specifically designed to incite a discourse that tries to draw out and preserve complexities. It is tantalizing to craft texts—in this case a book—that try to "answer" questions. Unfortunately the questions posed here do not lend themselves to simple answers.

I also feel it is necessary to acknowledge that having this "developmental stage" foregrounded has accomplished significant political, fiscal, and practical changes on the ground—in schools and

classrooms. It has done important things. This book is not about denying or denouncing positive actions. Second, though, it is necessary to look at what is not so positive. Who is left out (intentionally or unintentionally) when the development stage of young adolescence is talked about, described, and enacted as a neutral platform for all other decisions regarding schooling practices? Who is privileged when this happens? What are the ends and aims of such discourses? What is lost when a conception such as stage developmentalism is not questioned?

I also want this book to be situated in the present—in real political contexts. Two recent texts convincingly make the case that the “Accountability Movement” has wielded profound power (and control) and inflicted significant damage on U.S. schools. Dianne Ravitch’s (2010) *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* is a particularly powerful indictment, as is Sharon Nichols and David Berliner’s (2007) *Collateral Damage: How Highstakes Testing Corrupts America’s Schools*. This book, therefore, is written at a time when students and teachers are under immense pressure to perform on tests that are far from the contingent, recursive realities of their day-to-day lives. I remain hopeful that the contingent, recursive conception asserted in this volume can, at once, inform the day-to-day(ness) of schooling and the larger societal issues (struggles, practices, policies) that frame what is even possible in schools.

## The Project

With these commitments in mind, the book aims to do the following:

1. To infuse, following Lesko, a contingent (profoundly contextual and dependent) and recursive (occurring over and over again in and over time) conception of adolescent growth and change into the discourse around young adolescence by making three theoretical pleas to those interested in the schooling of young adolescents (10-15 year olds):
  - To move away from a developmentally responsive vision to a contingently and recursively relational vision;
  - To move from “characterizing” young adolescenCE to “particularizing” young adolescenTS; and
  - To move from a “sameness” curriculum to a “difference” curriculum.

2. To have these three pleas, collectively, contribute to a theoretical basis for more particularized, critical work regarding issues including but not limited to race, class, gender, sexuality, power, and struggle.
3. To bring multiple responses to these pleas together in the same textual space, creating opportunities for readers to engage in and theorize what contingent, recursive growth and change might look and feel like. Scholars invited to respond represent different fields such as adolescent literacy, middle grades education, urban education, foundations, curriculum studies, comparative education, policy studies, and teacher education.

To these ends, I authored a theoretical essay (Section 1 of this volume) that serves as the “anchoring” text for the book. The anchor essay was sent to invited contributors. Potential contributors were asked to read the essay and based on their reading craft a response to one or more of the three theoretical pleas I made in the anchor essay, with the understanding that it would become a chapter length contribution in this volume.

I emphasized that the goal was to have the pleas seriously and thoughtfully considered (extended, stretched). To this end, I suggested that contributors might primarily discuss the plea(s), connect something from their own scholarship to one or more of the pleas, point-counterpoint particular arguments embedded in one or more of the pleas, or open up a plea wider (or extend its reach) for further “critical” consideration than I had done. In these cases (and other possibilities) a related goal was always to incite a discourse regarding contingent, recursive conceptions and the accompanying pleas. The goal was *not* to settle matters, as this would counter the very contingent, recursive conceptions that need to be imagined. When crafting their responses, contributors were asked to spend limited time (10-15% of the chapter) discussing the pleas and most of the time connecting somehow to their own work.

Twenty scholars collectively contributed thirteen sole and co-authored chapters “in response” to the anchor essay. What follows includes my anchor essay (Section 1); my editorial grouping of the chapters—in three subsequent sections, including my introductions to each section; and my concluding remarks. Again, the anchor essay is designed as a disrupting discourse, by which all the other contributions extend, expand, and—at times—push back. For instance, some contributors (e.g., Brown; Conklin) felt that my pleas might set up