

Eriksonian Identity Development in High School Students: Implications for Teachers and Guidance Counsellors

Dennis Raphael
university of western ontario

La théorie du développement de Erik Erikson postule que l'adolescence est la période pendant laquelle l'individu doit acquérir une identité en s'engageant dans des rôles adultes. Pour Erikson, cet engagement met en jeu la considération et l'adoption d'un mode d'action visant à choisir une carrière et un ensemble de croyances idéologiques. On définit trois manières de traiter ces tâches avec des élèves de 12^e année dans une école secondaire. Les élèves dits *ouverts* explorent les alternatives professionnelles et idéologiques et ne s'engagent pas. Les élèves dits *fermés* sont engagés quant aux perspectives d'avenir et aux croyances et fermés quant aux alternatives. Les élèves dits *diffus* ne sont ni engagés quant aux alternatives ni intéressés à les explorer. Pour ces trois types d'élèves, on propose des profils basés sur les caractéristiques des sujets et les corrélations de la définition du groupe. On suggère que les caractéristiques particulières et les besoins de ces élèves méritent la formulation d'interventions pédagogiques adaptées à chaque type d'élèves. On présente aux conseillers pédagogiques et aux professeurs différentes approches possibles pour ces groupes d'élèves. On analyse également l'utilité de l'interview qui permet de déterminer l'identité du sujet pour la prévision de son comportement ultérieur.

Adolescence and adolescents are very much like the weather: everybody talks about them but very few do anything. The present paper reviews briefly various conceptions of adolescence and suggests that Erikson's theory of identity development, providing as it does for various manners of dealing with adolescent issues, provides a framework for dealing with individuals' particular strengths and needs. Referring to previous research among adolescents in a Southern Ontario high school, it is suggested that the different types of adolescents in the high school setting could best benefit from particular types of counselling approaches. Various programs at the secondary school level which could benefit all types of students are also noted, as is the possible value of the identity interview for locating students experiencing difficulties.

CONCEPTIONS OF ADOLESCENCE

Throughout history there has been a great interest and concern with both adolescence and adolescents. The word "adolescence" is derived from the Latin verb *adolescere* meaning to grow up, and marks the transition period

between childhood and adulthood. Viewpoints concerning the nature of the adolescent mind and the best manner for parents and educators to deal with it have always been plentiful. One writer suggested:

They are passionate, irascible, and apt to be carried away by their impulses. They are slaves, too, of their passion, as their ambition prevents their ever brooking a slight and renders them indignant at the mere idea of enduring an injury . . . They are fonder both of honour and of victory than of money, the reason why so few care so little for money being that they have never yet had experience of want.

So wrote Aristotle in 340 B.C. (Kiell, 1967). Aristotle also suggested, as did Plato (1953), that the main task of the educator at this time was the stimulation and training of the child's intellect as it was only during adolescence that the rational behavior and thought unique to mankind emerged. In a more contemporary vein, various theorists have presented their conceptions of what is involved with adolescence. G. Stanley Hall (1904) introduced the modern concept of adolescence as a universal period of *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress), a reflection of internal psychological processes. Similarly, the psychoanalytic school of thought typified by Anna Freud (1958) also saw maturational factors insuring that *for all adolescents* (and, apparently their parents and teachers) the period was to be a stormy one.

Margaret Mead (1950) studied adolescents in Samoa and found no evidence of adolescent turmoil. She suggested that adolescent turmoil, when seen, was a result of the culture's non-support of the child's adoption of adult roles. Albert Bandura (1964) and Douvan and Adelson (1966) studied middle class teenagers in the United States and also questioned the assumption of adolescence as a universally distressing period. This discrepancy of viewpoints, based upon observations of adolescents, suggests that there may not be a single path through the transition from childhood to adulthood.

ERIKSON'S THEORY

Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of adolescence suggests that there are various manners of dealing with the tasks of attaining adulthood. According to his theory, development occurs as a result of the child's mastering of a series of crises. The term crisis for Erikson denotes "not an impending sense of catastrophe . . . but a necessary turning point, a crucial moment when development must have one way or another, marshalling sources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (p. 6). The first three crises (with outcomes of either trust or mistrust, autonomy or shame, and initiative or guilt) occur during infancy and early childhood and involve the interaction of child and family. If these interactions are positive the foundations achieved of trust, autonomy, and initiative make subsequent tasks easier. The fourth crisis (with an outcome of either industry or inferiority) occurs when the young child must attend and do well at school.

The fifth crisis of identity formation occurs during adolescence when the individual must begin to consider and adopt adult roles. The importance Erikson ascribes to this period is reflected by his devoting an entire volume to *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968).

Crisis of Identity

During adolescence, the individual must organize and consolidate his childhood experiences in preparation for the consideration and adoption of adult roles. For Erikson, the adoption of adult roles involves the exploration of and commitment to a vocational course of action and the establishment of a world view, "the need of the young person to develop a sense of identity; from all possible and imaginable relations, he must make a series of ever-narrowing selection of personal, occupational, sexual, and ideological commitments" (Erikson, 1968, p. 245). Ideally, the adolescent should have the experience of a *moratorium* period of exploring alternatives in the occupational and ideological spheres before arriving at final commitments. Once having explored alternatives and having settled upon commitments the individual is said to have attained a firm flexible identity, i.e. identity achievement. Some adolescents cannot give up prematurely arrived-at commitments and explore alternatives during the *moratorium* period. Erikson describes these cases as examples of identity foreclosure. Finally, many adolescents demonstrate a situation like that of Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, in which they "cannot take hold" of an identity, resulting in a state of identity diffusion. Erikson's theory, being developmental in nature, suggests that movement is possible between these conditions, yet gives the impression that distinctive manners of dealing with these issues exist.

Erikson's theory, therefore, suggests that there may be various manners of dealing with adolescent issues. For some, adolescence may be a period of exploring alternatives, a time undifferentiated from childhood, in that the individual continues along a prechosen path of plans and beliefs, or a difficult time in which an identity must be grasped for. It is also of importance to note that Erikson's theory, especially as it concerns adolescence, attempts to take into account society's role in meeting the needs of the adolescent. Thus, a society that provides neither opportunities for exploration nor alternative possibilities (such as suitable employment) will not be fostering positive identity development. More specifically, the school seems (indirectly through its atmosphere and goals) to have a direct input into adolescents' identity development.

Identity Status in University Students

On the basis of Erikson's conceptualizations of what was involved in the individual's attainment of identity, James Marcia (1966), a clinical psychologist, suggested an interview format for determining the explora-

tion of alternatives and degree of commitment to occupational plans and ideological beliefs. Inquiry was made into university students' vocational courses of action and religious and political beliefs leading to the outlining of identity statuses that reflect differing manners of dealing with adolescent issues. A number of studies have examined correlates of such identity statuses among male university students and have suggested that those who explore alternatives and arrive at commitments seem to have the most stable self-images (Marcia, 1967), were more likely to feel responsible for their lives (Waterman, Beubal, & Waterman, 1970), and exhibited the highest levels of moral reasoning (Podd, 1972) in response to a series of situational dilemmas. Findings for female university students indicated that those who had explored a variety of alternatives and had achieved commitments had the most difficult areas of study (Marcia & Friedman, 1970), had a strong personal frame of reference (Schenkle, 1975), and were least likely to be swayed by others (Toder & Marcia, 1973). University females who were "diffuse" in their plans and beliefs performed the poorest on these measures.

The findings indicated that, as Erikson suggested, the consideration of and commitment to occupational choices and ideological beliefs was related to "high identity." An inability to explore alternatives or show commitments was associated with "low identity," since it appeared that the general manner of dealing with adolescent issues was related to many indices of behavioral functioning. The studies were somewhat limited in their applicability to the adolescent period, for a number of reasons. Firstly, use of university students involved examination of young adults, not real adolescents. Secondly, these individuals probably represented a select portion of the adolescent population, being unusually high in motivation for achievement, intelligence, and social-class standing. Thirdly, the use of discrete statuses did not allow for the postulating of *manners* of dealing with issues that were specifically reflective of Erikson's conceptions of openness to environmental opportunities and ability to deal with these opportunities.

I attempted to deal with such issues by examining a more representative, younger sample of the Canadian adolescent population, using refinements of the identity status paradigm. The actual research data and methodological procedures from that study are available elsewhere (Raphael, in press). The present report provides a brief overview of the study and summarizes the results, in an attempt to examine the educational implication of Erikson's theory and research related to it.

IDENTITY STATUS IN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

One hundred grade 12 adolescent females from a suburban Southern Ontario high school were interviewed to determine their manner of dealing with issues of future occupational plans, religious belief, and political

interest. Three main groups of adolescents were identified, on the basis of their responses to an interview schedule examining these concerns. All judgments were made by the author according to the criterion presented below. For 20 randomly selected tapes agreement of another judge with the author's subject placement was 91%. Table 1 presents a brief summary of the judges' criteria. The detailed responses below attempt to give educators a flavor of the criteria used and the characteristics of the different student types.

Table 1 / Identity Groups for High School Students

Group	Open to alternatives	Commitment
Open	Yes	No
Closed	No	Yes
Diffuse	No	No

Note: Data are adapted from Raphael (1975).

Open or Moratorium Students

These individuals were seen as exploring various occupational and ideological alternatives. They seemed interested in exploring various plans and viewpoints in terms of the following criteria and could be said to be in the moratorium period of exploring alternatives. While not necessarily interested in arriving at commitments at this point, they seemed to be open to alternatives. Commitment, when observed, was viewed as tentative and subject to alteration. Some examples:

Future plans

1. I'm coming back to grade 13 and then going to university. At university I'll be taking a general course because I'm not sure whether I want to major in sociology or English. I won't make up my mind until I take a few courses.
2. I'm trying to decide whether to go to college or university. At university I'll be getting a B.Sc. while at college the program might be easier. I also have to decide whether to go into chemistry or a general sciences program.
3. I'll be going to nursing school. I think I may want to become a nurse but of course I may not like it and would then switch to a liberal arts program.

Religion area

1. I've been thinking about whether there's a God or not. I've taken a world religions course and talk about it a lot with friends.
2. I was brought up fairly religious and have moved away from it lately. I find it really interesting and talk to friends about it. I've not yet come to any conclusion.
3. I guess if it were up to me I wouldn't believe in God but my mother is very Catholic and it's really hard for me to think about it. I'm very confused about it now.

Politics area

1. I read the newspaper and talk about politics with my parents and friends. I think inflation has to be stopped. Since the Liberals can't do anything about it I guess it's time to give the Conservatives a try.
2. I've taken a world politics course and found that pretty interesting. I've also become interested in the tax system and the inequality between the provinces within that system.

Closed or Foreclosure Students

These individuals were seen as committed to plans and beliefs and closed to alternatives. Plans have usually been decided upon and beliefs were very similar to those held by parents. These students could be said to be similar to Erikson's foreclosure type, in that they did not appear willing to explore possibilities and expressed preadolescent commitments.

Future plans

1. I decided two years ago to become a legal secretary. I don't think I'll be changing my mind. After grade 13 I'll go to college for a two-year course.
2. I thought about becoming a doctor but am now pretty much settled on being a nurse. I'll go and get my B.Sc. at Queen's after grade 13 and I don't think I'll become interested in anything else.
3. Once I have kids I think I'll give up my job and stay at home with them. I'll probably stay with them until they reach high school or so. I wouldn't want to leave them alone or anything.

Religion area

1. I was brought up Anglican and still attend church every Sunday. I never questioned whether there was a God or not and still do not. In fact I believe very strongly in God.
2. I always went to church until a few years ago. Now I believe that one doesn't have to go to church to believe. I believe and don't blow my horn about it. I don't think I'll be becoming any more or less religious.
3. When I was 12 or 13 I started to wonder whether there was a God or not. But then my parents spoke to me and took me to see a priest who answered my questions. I believe now and don't doubt anymore.

Politics area

1. I'm Liberal like my parents. I agree with what they are trying to do and I guess I'll vote for them.
2. I guess I'd vote Conservative because my parents do. I listen to what they say and agree with them.

Diffuse Students

These individuals seemed unconcerned with and uninterested in issues of future occupational plans and religious and political matters, and are similar to Erikson's diffusion types.

Future plans

1. I guess I'll go out and get a job. I have no idea what I'll be doing: I'll worry about it next year. I'll not stay with it, I'll just work until I get bored with it.

2. I'll try to become a stewardess. A friend of mine knows somebody who might get me a job. I haven't spoken to her for a while. Maybe she doesn't know somebody — I really don't know. It seems like a nice thing to be doing.
3. I'll go to university and take something. I really don't know what. I guess I'm going to university because you have to get a job.

Religion area

1. I don't care at all about religion. My parents were never religious. I guess I don't believe in God but I never talk to anyone about it.
2. To me it seems that all religions are the same. I never talk to anyone about it and it's really not important to me one way or the other.

Politics area

1. I don't read the newspaper or anything. I really don't care about or understand politics. I never talk to anyone about it.
2. No. I don't care about it. My friends talk about it but I don't join in their talk.

Individuals were placed into an overall identity status based on their being in the same status for at least 2 or 3 areas. Most (83 of 100) could be so placed, indicating that the manner of dealing with issues is fairly general and can be reliably assessed. It should be noted that at this point (early months of grade 12) it was not felt that commitment or closedness to alternatives was a positive phenomenon, most students at that time having an additional year (grade 13) in addition to the balance of grade 12 to complete. Thus, no identity-achieved group (exploration and then commitment) was outlined. Students who expressed tentative commitments (classified "open" group in this study) came closest, theoretically, to being identity achieved. Support was provided by the finding that a few students classified as closed or foreclosed, though having stated they had explored occupational alternatives, invariably were firmly closed in the religion and politics areas.

Distribution of Students in Identity Groups

Among the 100 students in this affluent Southern Ontario community, memberships in identity groups were nearly equal (open = 24, closed = 34, diffuse = 25). Seventeen subjects were in different groups for each area and were not placed in an overall status. These findings support the view that the adolescent population differs in expressed manner of dealing with issues.

Summary of Results and Profiles of Student Types

A number of cognitive and personality measures were administered to subjects as was an information search task, to examine the characteristics associated with manner of dealing with issues. These measures included paper-and-pencil indices of intelligence (Wonderlic Personnel Test, 1973), cognitive complexity (Hunt, 1971), intolerance of ambiguity (Budner,

1962), and overall ego development or adjustment (Rasmussen, 1964). Grade point average for grade 11 was obtained from school records and subject's social class was assessed according to Blishen's (1967) Canadian Measure.

The information search task (Noy & Hunt, 1972) allowed students to form an impression of Sigmund Freud by asking questions about him. These questions were answered by providing from a data bank a card or cards containing the desired information. After the question period the student was asked to respond to a short-answer question for each card read, and to write an essay about Sigmund Freud as a person. This task provided measures of information search, information received, and organization and content of essays. It was expected that this measure would examine subjects' ability to take advantage of a learning situation in which environmental information was available.

Profiles of Group Types

Open status subjects were defined as aware and interested in alternatives in the areas of occupational choice, religious belief, and political interest, presenting a profile of an individual actively constructing an "identity." On measures of intelligence, cognitive complexity (or ability to take a variety of viewpoints), and ability to tolerate ambiguous situations, performance of these students was significantly higher than that of students of other groups. The open student also asked the most questions about Sigmund Freud and showed the greatest percentage of recall on a test of knowledge acquisition. The open student also came from a household where father's occupational rating was significantly higher than in the other groups.

Closed group subjects were defined as entering adulthood possessing plans and beliefs decided upon prior to the moratorium period of exploring alternatives. On measures of intelligence, ability to take perspectives, tolerance of ambiguity, and social class of father, their scores were significantly lower than open status students. Information search was at an intermediate level. Yet, on a measure of ego development or overall adjustment, the closed students' scores were the highest, significantly higher than the diffuse group's scores. The high adjustment scores of the closed group subjects and the moderate degree of information search suggested some degree of adaptiveness in their manner of dealing with adolescent issues.

Diffusion group subjects were defined as both uncommitted and uninterested in a course of vocational action and in a set of beliefs: the least adaptive manner of dealing with adolescent issues. The results of the study supported this view. This type of student scored the lowest on intelligence, ability to take a variety of perspectives, tolerance of ambiguity, and father's

social-class standing. The diffuse group also scored significantly lower than closed status students on a measure of overall adjustment. Given a chance to seek out information about a famous person, this student had the poorest information search and knowledge recall. The tendency of the diffuse students to score at the lowest pole on almost all the measures of the study supports the view that their manner of dealing with adolescent issues was the least adaptive mode.

There was no difference between groups in grade point average. This was seen as reflecting different programs taken by students leading to a diminishing of differences between groups. It may be, for example, that the diffusion group students were taking easier courses of study.

Table 2 presents a general summary of the research findings. The intelligence differences observed were statistically related to the observed group differences in the intolerance of ambiguity and information search measures, and can be seen in detail in Raphael (in press). Nevertheless these findings do not negate the conclusion that three types of adolescents are seen in the school population.

Table 2 / Characteristics of Student Groups

	Open	Closed	Diffuse
Intelligence	High ^a	Low	Low
Cognitive complexity	High ^a	Low	Low
Tolerance for ambiguity	High ^a	Low	Low
Adjustment	Moderate	High ^b	Low
Social class	High ^a	Low	Low
Information search	High ^c	Moderate	Low
Knowledge recall	High ^c	Moderate	Low
Grade point average	No differences		

Note: Data are adapted from Raphael (1975, 1978).
^aSignificantly higher ($p < .05$ – $p < .01$) than Diffusion and Closed groups.
^bSignificantly higher ($p < .05$) than Diffusion group.
^cSignificantly higher ($p < .05$ – $p < .01$) than Diffusion group.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GUIDANCE AND EDUCATION

The study indicated that there are apparently 3 diverse types of adolescents seen at the grade 12 level. These groups have been described as *Open*, *Closed*, or *Diffuse*, with respect to their manner of dealing with adolescent issues of occupational choice and ideological belief.

It has been suggested by Hunt (1975) that there is *no one best way* to counsel and educate *all* students. This is so because (it can be assumed) since individuals differ in both their makeup and their needs, what may be a good approach for one student may not necessarily be best for another.

This “matching models” approach (Hunt, 1971) suggests that educators should, when interacting with students, be cognizant of individual differences, and adapt their interventions and techniques to fit the particular case.

Implications for Counsellors

With regard to the identity types presented in this paper, it would be reasonable to suggest that individuals in each identity group should be interacted with in differing ways.

Open status students are uncommitted to a course of action, yet this attitude seems to be based upon good reasons: these students perceived a variety of options open to them and were wary of cutting themselves off from the possibilities. Support for such students should be given in their exploration of alternatives. Indeed, it appears that this exploration of alternatives reflects the superior manner of dealing with issues and should be seen as a positive occurrence. Some adolescents, when informed of the purpose of the study, were relieved, as they had been feeling pressure to commit themselves even at this relatively early point (first few months of grade 12). Many adolescents may be forced into premature decisions by parents and educators who perceive noncommitment as bad. Information about alternatives should be provided to those seeking out such information.

Diffuse group students, while also uncommitted, are very different from “open students.” They appear unable to “take hold” by considering future plans and beliefs, and appear (from their poor information search) to be unable to seek out alternatives. While some in this status exhibited a “who cares attitude,” many appeared to have some emotional difficulties. Such students appear to need guidance and direction. It seems reasonable that the needs of this type of student lie more in exhibiting some kind of commitment than in being exposed to many alternatives. One girl, when asked what the guidance department had done for her, stated “Oh, they just threw some folders in front of me.” Apparently she had desired a bit more personal attention. Counsellors might apply a structured approach, presenting these students with *limited* alternatives through which they can begin to involve themselves.

Closed group students are satisfied with their plans and beliefs and appear to be the “most adjusted.” Counsellors might be opposed to the suggestion that they make attempts to “open up” closed students in order to have them consider alternatives. Yet, student commitments to plans may be thwarted by events in the environment (e.g. non-admission to teachers’ or medical colleges). All students should be encouraged to bear in mind that alternatives exist should plans be unattainable. Perhaps counselling approaches with this type of student should involve initial

exploration of alternative courses of action, through guided “homework type” assignments in various identity areas.

Implications for Education

Since issues of future plans, religion, and politics appear to be concerns of many students, it is suggested that special courses be offered in them. In the high school in which the study was conducted, many students mentioned taking world religions and world politics courses. In addition, schools might also offer a vocational decision-making course for students. Offerings like these would assist all three identity types. *Open* students could be exposed to various possibilities which would help support their questioning of plans and beliefs. *Closed* students might be able to consider alternative plans and beliefs in a supportive non-threatening atmosphere. *Diffuse* students might gain the support necessary to begin the process of committing themselves to plans and beliefs. Also, the school must obviously go beyond its four walls to attempt to integrate the learning environment with the real occupational world, which is such a critical concern for many students.

Another speculative application of the findings may be in the design of particular educational approaches for different students. It may be that diffuse students do not seek out information and may benefit most from structured lecture-type lessons. (Their poor information search suggests this possibility.) On the other hand, open students do seem to be able to seek out information, and may enjoy more flexible curriculum programs. These speculations merit further study.

The identity status interview also appears to provide a means for the educator to quickly evaluate the students’ state of identity information and formulate an appropriate educational and counselling intervention. The interview can provide an easy, yet meaningful, index of the current functioning of many adolescents, since its content is very straightforward and can easily be integrated into ongoing educational practices. Perhaps, most importantly, the interview may provide a means of identifying individuals experiencing more than moderate difficulty. The present writer was able to identify individuals who appeared to be having real difficulties in dealing with these life issues. A follow-up study, after three years, is currently being conducted of the 100 students, to examine the possible utility of the interview for this purpose. The follow-up study is also examining the input of the economic situation into adolescents’ identity development, analysing factors such as unemployment and future uncertainty in relation to their functioning.

Copies of the interview and manual designed for high school students are available from the author, as are reprints of the original research paper (Raphael, in press).

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Dennis Raphael is an assistant professor of educational psychology at the Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario, London, Ont. N6G 1G7