

ESSAY BOOK REVIEW

Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence. Nancy Lesko. 2001. New York: Routledge Falmer. 260 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 0-415-92833-8. US\$90.00. Softcover. ISBN 0-415-92834-6. US\$24.95.

Conversational Borderlands: Language and Identity in an Alternative Urban High School. Betsy Rymes. 2001. New York: Teachers College Press. 193 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 0-8077-4130-2. US\$50.00. Softcover. ISBN 0-8077-4129-9. US\$23.95.

School Kids/Street Kids: Identity Development in Latino Students. Nilda Flores-Gonzalez. 2002. New York: Teachers College Press. 197 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 0-8077-4224-4. US\$50.00. Softcover. ISBN 0-8077-4223-6. US\$23.95.

Reconceptualizing adolescent identity

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One of the primary themes addressed by researchers currently investigating adolescence and adolescent literacy is the construction of adolescent identity (Alvermann, 2001; McCarthy & Moje, 2002). From traditional developmental stage theories that describe adolescents as peer-oriented youth controlled by raging hormones (Finders, 1998/1999) to sociocultural and postmodern views of adolescence where social factors are considered to be as important as biological determinants, researchers have been enlarging their understandings of what it means to be an adolescent, how adolescence is defined, and how adolescent identities are constructed (McCarthy & Moje).

A social-constructivist theoretical framework guided our choice of books for this essay review. We purposefully chose books that addressed the social factors and conditions of young adults' lives and went beyond traditional definitions of adolescence developed in the early 1900s. Additionally, as we discussed possible texts on adolescence and adolescent literacies for this review, we decided to select books that addressed adolescent identity rather than adolescent literacy or pedagogy. Our final selections include ethnographic and sociocultural research methodologies. While

Betsy Rymes and Nilda Flores-Gonzalez draw upon empirical data collected in actual school settings using ethnographic research methodologies, Nancy Lesko offers a historical-philosophical piece drawing from the perspective of cultural criticism.

The three books we review here offer different conceptions of how adolescent identity is formed in the social contexts of adolescents' lives. In addition, each book goes beyond theories of adolescence and adolescent identity that focus solely on the biological determinants of adolescence (e.g., the onset of puberty and hormonal changes); instead, each focuses on the social, economic, and institutional factors that affect conceptions of adolescence. Each book offers compelling evidence of the shortcomings of traditional developmental stage theories and suggests new ways of conceptualizing adolescent identity formation.

Act Your Age!

In *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, Nancy Lesko questions tendencies to label adolescents as deficient, controlled by hormones, crazy, and a little dangerous. She asks educators to move beyond this sealed system of reasoning and open their minds to a social-constructivist interpretation. Lesko points out that static and unexamined assumptions about adolescents form the foundation for how educators think about secondary schooling and make traditional ideas about teaching and curriculum sound reasonable and appropriate. These assumptions are the essence of teacher-centered pedagogy and authoritarian educational practices. By deconstructing these assumptions, Lesko aims to contribute to a broader redefinition of the foundation and practices of secondary education. She points out that educators can learn from adolescents just as adolescents can learn from educators. Though her writing is tedious at times, she succeeds in presenting a compelling case.

Lesko's interest in writing *Act Your Age!* arose from her dissatisfaction with how adolescents were portrayed in scientific as well as popular texts. She realized that scientific and popular ideas have helped perpetuate a number of assumptions. These assumptions include the notions that adolescents (a) have raging hormones, so they could not be expected to think in a sustained or critical way, and (b) are immature, so they could not be expected to be responsible. Simply stated, how could teachers expect adolescents to engage in thoughtful discussions with all the competing hormones raging in the classroom?

Further, emanating from these characterizations of mindlessness and irresponsibility is the notion that adolescents are inhuman and dangerous when they become involved in forbidden adult behavior, such as doing drugs or having sex. They are treated as if they exist outside of customary human and social relations. Thus, when adolescents go bad, the only recourse is to punish them.

Given this set of assumptions, Lesko has both theoretical and conceptual aims in writing *Act Your Age!* She investigates how the idea of adolescent development was created through science (i.e., psychology, anthropology, and pedagogy), through reformers working in juvenile justice, and through organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association and scouting. She examines how adolescence was conceptualized throughout history, and how ideas from the past affect current thoughts about youth. Lesko enters into interdisciplinary conversations about how social issues influence the connotations of terms such as *rational adult*, *productive citizen*, *masculinity/femininity*, *sexuality*, *race*, and *maturity/immaturity*. She disrupts simplistic notions of adolescence by offering a reconceptualization that includes components of adulthood and childhood simultaneously.

Key to Lesko's discussion is the Great Chain of Being, a metaphor for development along the lines of race, gender, and national progress. The Great Chain of Being was a focal point of discussions about evolution in the late 1800s. It referred to the hierarchy of animals, people, and societies that portrayed evolutionary history and sociological ranking. Evolutionary rankings were frequently displayed in tree diagrams or charts, with progress depicted from bottom to top. Along with the notion of progress, the Great Chain of Being portrayed the notion of decadence. According to decadence theory, the lower one was on the rankings, the more primitive or savage one was considered. This thinking dominated Western society well into the 20th century.

According to the Great Chain of Being, progress and civilization were the exclusive state of white men; people of color, women, and youth were ranked lower and regarded as less civilized. Indeed, adolescence became the divide between the rationality, autonomy, and morality of the white male and the emotionality and conformity of children, women, the lower classes, and primitive people. The job of society (white male adults) was to help adolescents progress up the evolutionary scale, to become better, more civilized human beings.

One of the consequences of this evolutionary stance for adolescent development was that adoles-

cents were viewed in light of race, class, and gender experiences devised in the West. The development or civilization of youth was about re-creating whiteness and promoting masculinity. A second consequence was that it placed a strong interest on the future over the past and present. Adolescents were always seen as in the process of becoming; movement was always seen as linear in the re-creation process of becoming more civilized.

The national progress aspect of the Great Chain of Being had its own consequences for youth. U.S. public officials were preoccupied with building a modern social order because the United States was becoming an international power. Building a nation and an empire required developing a useful, productive citizenry. Thus, molding and shaping adolescents became an extremely important undertaking.

Lesko examines in some depth the contributions of the so-called father of adolescence, psychologist G. Stanley Hall. Hall saw adolescence as an opportunity to progress up the Great Chain of Being. Among other things, Hall recommended pedagogical directives for discipline and instruction for each stage of boyhood and adolescence. A strict regimen was considered necessary to avoid the possibility of moral anarchy. The contemporaneous development of such organizations as the Boy Scouts was an effort to reinforce this notion and to develop loyalty to class and country. Lesko also points out that team sports were seen as the ideal pedagogical means to civilize adolescents and develop their loyalties. These efforts were also conceived as a means to deal with the problem of adolescents who needed to be brought into line and back on a course toward proper development. Adolescents, after all, needed to be controlled and protected.

Lesko shows that many of today's educational reform efforts continue traditional notions of the importance of discipline, loyalty, and civility. She discusses the broad remasculinizing of the schools: an increased emphasis on a traditional, teacher-centered curriculum; academic rigor; a movement away from multicultural education; the importance of math, science, and technology; and moral standards, to name a few. She points out that all this is happening along with a broader reemphasis on patriotism as the proper way for the U.S. public to express itself.

Act Your Age! concludes that current dominant assumptions about adolescents are unsatisfactory. If educators are to advocate effectively for adolescents, they need new perspectives. Educators should not reiterate established (and inadequate) claims of adolescent development.

Lesko proposes three changes. First, because the notion of development connotes a heritage that embraces racism, classism, and sexism, educators need to find a theoretical framework that emphasizes awareness that adolescents are active social beings. To this end, she suggests the use of feminist theories to focus on the recursive nature of growth and change, rather than on development as a linear concept.

Second, educators must revise their conceptions of time by no longer thinking of the past, present, and future as discernible segments of a linear progression. Lesko advocates that educators think of time as simultaneously holding seemingly opposite identities. Educators need to think of the possibilities of being simultaneously mature and immature, old and young. This is necessary to escape the notion that time is linear and cumulative.

Finally, Lesko points out that past assumptions about adolescent development were actually a response to the problems presented by economic and societal change. Adolescence was interpreted to be a developmental stage for the emerging modern citizen equipped to meet the challenges of new social and economic circumstances. She suggests that as challenges are posed to the modern economy and family, and as educators try to redefine the purpose of our citizenry and nation, so must they, too, redefine adolescence and their needs in these new times. Interpretations of adolescents' growth and change need to be more fluid and spontaneous. Such a view is consistent with emphases on greater flexibility in dealing with organizations and individuals' potentials. The boundary between adolescence and adulthood is no longer clear; distinctions are blurred and everyone is in a state of becoming.

Conversational Borderlands

In *Conversational Borderlands: Language and Identity in an Alternative Urban High School*, Betsy Rymes researches adolescent identity through the narratives told by students who have dropped out of traditional high schools and have dropped into an alternative high school. This alternative high school was created as part of the charter school reform movement in southern California. Using discourse analysis, Rymes shows how the stories students tell, the social interactions that take place in and out of school, and the institutional context of the alternative high school "coauthor" adolescent identity. Her analysis focuses on *dropping out* narratives, stories of why students left former high schools; *dropping in* narratives, stories of how students ended up at City

School (a pseudonym); and *naming rituals*, how students acquired particular nicknames or gang monikers.

Students who enrolled in City School had been cast aside from traditional high schools for a variety of reasons, and their placement in this alternative high school represented their last chance for success in the public school system. City School's goal was to reduce the high cost of school failure and to help students become educated and employable citizens. This school was created for adolescents who did not identify themselves as students. In the end, City School closed due to financial mismanagement and fraudulent administrative maneuverings described throughout *Conversational Borderlands*.

Rymes analyzes the discussions she conducted with small groups of students to understand the identities these students constructed. Reviewing particular grammatical forms and structures that were constructed from her analysis of students' narratives, she offers a window into the many variables that affect how adolescents view themselves and the identities they construct. According to Rymes, the accounts she presents

demonstrate the power of narrative not only to create a "self-portrait," but also to conceal the complexities of life choices—complexities that can be buried by the institutional machinery that underpins narration. Institutions and institutional discourse play a powerful role in the concealment and simplification, as well as the elaboration of identity. (p. 89)

A dominant theme offered throughout *Conversational Borderlands* is that "adolescent literacy and attitudes toward school are not only created by individuals, but are also facilitated, 'co-authored,' by society, policy makers, institutions, peers, and teachers, through interaction" (p. 162). In order to understand how adolescent identity is created, or coauthored, in the contexts of school and the experiences of adolescents, Rymes analyzes linguistic features of the narratives students told in small-group discussions with her.

Three primary goals set forth in the introduction of *Conversational Borderlands* provided the impetus for the study: (a) to illuminate adolescent identity and its relationship to school; (b) to illustrate how a context created by a reform instrument, namely a charter school, shapes the interactions that occur there; and (c) to illustrate a research methodology that can help researchers understand the human effects of school reform. After detailing the historical context of the creation of City School and the demographic information concerning the students who enrolled there, Rymes discusses the rationale for her

analysis of student narratives. She explains, "analysis of language-in-use was my ticket of entry into these borderlands" (p. 13). She studies the linguistic resources students and teachers at City School used to establish individual identity and negotiate their roles within the charter school setting.

Drawing on the work of Duranti (1986) and referring to the students' narratives as a particular speech genre (Bakhtin, 1986), Rymes explains it this way:

because speakers are always designing their utterances according to their interlocutors' reactions, the audience becomes "co-author" of the speech of any individual; the way in which speakers present themselves is as much a function of who they are speaking to as who they "really" are as individuals. (pp. 13–14)

This coauthoring is a central consideration when analyzing adolescents' narratives in order to understand the social and institutional forces that affected the identities they constructed.

The analysis of student dropping out narratives resulted in three primary themes: (a) unavoidable resort to violence, (b) context of omnipresent threat, and (c) mitigating responsibility (minimizing one's role in violent behaviors). The analysis indicates that the youth told stories that made them look good—they had no choice but to respond violently—and these youth even attempted to make their violence seem honorable. Students believed they were simply products of inescapable circumstances, dealing with ongoing strife and a sense of problems facing them from all angles. Students "use particular grammatical forms in systematic ways to convey the opinions and inescapable nature of the circumstances to which they respond" (p. 51).

During the small-group discussions, individual students tried to "win the sympathy of their interlocutors through narrative construction of their own orientation within a moral framework identifiable through this narrative genre" (p. 56). Rymes tries to reframe the dropping out narratives to make students seem like they were being pushed out more than dropping out. Their decisions not to return to school were more socially and institutionally influenced than individually chosen. She describes this as a "process of disengagement" (p. 71), a series of broken promises and repeated victimizations that led to them leaving their traditional high schools. She details examples from the narratives that point to students' processes of disengaging with school rather than simply being kicked out.

In contrast to the accounts of dropping out, the dropping in narratives portray former selves where students identify their past illicit activities, de-

scribe a specific turning point in their life trajectory, and portray school as a companion to their resultant changes. City School officials selected students for Rymes to interview who presented the best the alternative program had to offer. Administrators and concerned stakeholders specifically sent students to deliver shining testimonials concerning their success at City School. Although the dropping in narratives contained similar elements to the dropping out narratives, they had an additional element, a turning point where students made a shift from the “wrong path and start[ed] over” (p. 77). Most of the dropping in narratives included the following: (a) a central problematic experience, (b) a response to the experience, and (c) a consequence. Students who offered a dropping in narrative discussed a situation or challenge that drove them back to the school environment, how they responded to this challenge, and the consequences they faced because of their decisions. Although these dropping in narratives should not be construed as having occurred for a majority of City School students, they suggest possibilities for alternative programs.

Rymes suggests that if adolescents’ identities can be constructed in such a way as to lead to students dropping out of high school, then in the right circumstances these same adolescents’ identities can be recast in ways that support continued education and productive membership in society. For Rymes, dropping out of high school is the result of a long series of experiences and encounters in school and in life that result in the building of an identity compatible with leaving school. This identity is coauthored through social interaction with peers, teachers, home environments, gang affiliations, and the institutional forces of public school.

In closing her book, Rymes offers several recommendations. Teachers should attend to adolescents’ narratives in order to understand their lives and the challenges they face in returning to an alternative high school. The structures of school should create space for students to share their narratives in classrooms through storytelling and discussion. She also recommends allowing students’ voices to take over when sharing narratives. This lets teachers learn from students, rather than assuming the traditional role of transmitting knowledge to students.

In addition, Rymes suggests not leaving students’ narratives unexamined. Narratives provide an opportunity for students and teachers to reframe the stories they tell and encourage students to “listen carefully and consider life’s challenges from multiple perspectives” (p. 168). Teachers need to recognize that talk is a medium used to understand adoles-

cents’ roles in the world and develop their identities. Rymes asserts there is a give and take between what we say and who we are.

School Kids/Street Kids

School Kids/Street Kids: Identity Development in Latino Students, by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, presents an extensive ethnographic study of Puerto Rican and Mexican students enrolled in an urban Chicago high school. Flores-Gonzalez challenges earlier essentialist school dropout theories including deficit views, resistance theory relating to the mainstream whiteness of schools, and reproduction theory suggesting that schools serve dominant power groups best. Her study of 33 Latino/a students disrupts simple explanations of why minority students elect to stay in school, leave, or return after a period of dropping out. Flores-Gonzalez moves beyond static conceptions of school “stayers” and “leavers,” noting that this diverse group of individuals makes it impossible to create a simple dropout profile. Her study provides a detailed analysis of school stayers and leavers along with specific implications for structural and curricular reformation in schools serving large Hispanic student populations.

In the foreword to *School Kids/Street Kids*, Sonia Nieto asserts that “the academic success of Latino students is above all attributable to the environment in the schools they attend and the nature of the relationships they have with their teachers” (p. ix). To illustrate, Ernesto, one of the participants in this ethnography who dropped out of school, described his in-school experiences as uniformly boring and uncaring:

I hate people that talk so much through the whole class and then give you little time to do your work, you know what I mean. It’s like all the teachers talk for thirty minutes...give you ten minutes to do your work, and if you didn’t have your work done, you failed. (p. 115)

Flores-Gonzalez approaches her study from a sociopsychological perspective. This perspective drives the generation of categories and themes efficiently, yet we believe it becomes a double-edged sword. On the one side, it offers a parsimonious way to comment on student and school characteristics. On the other side, like stage perspectives of adolescent development with biologically deterministic elements, this perspective offers an overly linear view of adolescent identity. In particular, Flores-Gonzalez employs role-identity theory in her study. This theo-

ry posits that successful Latino/a students adopt a school-kid identity characterized by an affinity for, and active engagement with, approved academic and extracurricular functions. Flores-Gonzalez defines school role-identity theory as

a cumulative identity, it is composed of family, school, and community identities, such as the obedient and dutiful daughter, the all-American school athlete, and the church-boys and girls.... Because students want to maintain this image, identities that have the potential to conflict, disrupt, or negate their claims to being school kids are quickly discarded. (p. 11)

While this particular theory of identity construction was useful to Flores-Gonzalez in organizing and interpreting her ethnographic data, we criticize it in light of current commentaries on the fluidity, hybridity, and multifaceted nature of socially constructed adolescent identity (Bhabba, 1994; McDonald, 1999) as well as on postmodern counter-interviews to linear clock time versus fluid global time (Harper & Bean, 2003). Unlike the blurring of categories and the elements of multiple identities in contemporary postmodern views, Flores-Gonzalez sees identity as somewhat more static. Her perspective leaves adolescents in a time and space where they are working toward a future life as adults, discounting the present in favor of the future. This forward-looking, stuck-on-a-plateau view of adolescence has been challenged by recent thinking. For instance, as alluded to earlier in this review, Lesko argues that

youth are simultaneously young and old, learning and learned, working and in school. This idea of time (that is, of past, present, and future) as holding seemingly opposing identities *simultaneously* is, I believe, a necessary dimension of a retheorizing of adolescence. (p. 197)

In *School Kids/Street Kids*, Flores-Gonzalez sees identity as a kind of entropy-seeking state where multiple roles are troubling: "Role overload occurs when the multiple roles' demands cannot be met due to conflicts in time, place, or resources" (p. 17). Thus, a student who develops a street-gang identity that clashes with a school-kid identity may elect to jettison one role, depending on the satisfaction that is experienced. Flores-Gonzalez sees this process as a slow, laborious abandoning of one role for another. "Role exit is triggered by the increasing uneasiness and unhappiness experienced while being in a specific role" (p. 19). Alliances to new groups and cultures, ranging from out-of-school gangs to in-school sports and academics, shift slowly.

By and large, students in this study who were stayers developed close alliances with school-based

friends, extracurricular activities, and academic opportunities. Networks with caring teachers and similar-minded friends were important. Not all stayers were academic or athletic stars. Students who left school generally experienced some precipitating event that was the final straw, although markers such as shifts in appearance often preceded the leave-taking. Leavers were characterized by the sorts of rewards garnered through street culture.

Flores-Gonzalez also describes students who left for a time, then decided to return to school. Some were teen parents, and these students formed a supportive alliance with their school's Teen Parents program. As new parents, they saw school as a means to acquire cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) for the world of work necessary to support their families as well as a means to stay out of trouble.

School Kids/Street Kids offers specific implications for secondary school educators interested in lowering student attrition. Flores-Gonzalez argues for a strong college preparation curriculum with clear standards for performance. Consistent with the underlying theme in this study, that caring relationships with teachers and peers matter greatly to adolescents, Flores-Gonzalez notes that "Schools should make each student count, and make them feel they are somebody and not invisible" (p. 155). School-within-a-school programs and multicultural studies are steps in the right direction and are supported by studies of secondary school reform (e.g., Ancess, 2003).

Despite the concerns we have with the largely sociopsychological view of adolescent identity set forth in this study, Flores-Gonzalez's research adds significantly to the literature chronicling adolescents' struggles to reconcile their need for belonging and recognition within schools where true engagement in learning is all too rare (e.g., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Far too often, teens see school as future oriented and separated from immediate needs. The results and implications charted in Flores-Gonzalez's research point clearly to school reforms that influence whether or not students stay in school and benefit from their teachers' considerable efforts.

Concluding remarks

Traditional totalizing conceptions of adolescence as a time of turbulence, raging hormones, and immaturity diminish adolescents' voices and agency. These conceptions downplay adolescents' individuality and diversity. An emerging awareness of adolescence as socially constructed, rather than

biologically determined, helps create space for new understandings of adolescents and what they need to succeed in school.

Each book reviewed here discusses the construction of adolescent identities and new ways that adolescence has come to be defined. Adolescent identity is conceptualized as a socially constructed discourse that is multilayered and dynamic, constructed in a social and institutional milieu. Each portrays adolescent identity as a series of performances or discourse events that occur in social and institutional contexts rather than as a predetermined role that youth must adopt. Although the authors offer slightly different conceptions of adolescent identity, all three refute cognitive and biological theories that have dominated educators' thinking and provided a foundation for traditional, teacher-centered pedagogy and curriculum.

Lesko suggests that, traditionally, age is constructed as an orderly progression from an irrational state during childhood and adolescence to a mature rational state during adulthood. She argues for a reconceptualization of adolescence that addresses social, cultural, historical, and economic influences; she advocates moving beyond the conventional view of adolescence that concentrates on biological maturation causing a transitional period in life or a time of disturbance. Lesko goes to great lengths to discuss the historical trajectories of particular definitions of adolescence, specifically developmental stage theories and more fluid, complex social interaction theories. She claims that educators must conceive of adolescents as active participants in the educational process.

Rymes asserts that educators need to "pay attention to the specific agency and meaning-making of individuals, but always within the collectively identified and historically provided contexts and range of possibilities" (p. 195). She adds that development is not a linear, cumulative process. Instead, researchers and educators should look at the contexts and specific actions of adolescents without placing these actions into stages, steps, or periods of socialization.

Flores-Gonzalez tells educators to pay particular attention to the interests and needs of individual adolescents rather than treat them as a homogenized population without regard for individual differences. Her study suggests that school leavers are distinguished by feelings of anonymity, alienation, and marginalization from other students, while stayers are characterized by high levels of involvement in curricular and extracurricular activities. Schools, as a reflection of society, have done an inadequate job of distinguishing among the identities

of their constituents, leading to a one-size-fits-all curriculum.

All three books in one way or another disrupt the notion of the "implied adolescent" (Lewis & Finders, 2002, p. 101) that dominates the traditional professional literature on youth. This disruption provides a foundation for new conceptualizations of the learning experiences teachers might provide to adolescents in contemporary middle and high schools. Until educators rethink how they define adolescence, they won't change their expectations or their instruction.

Although these books focus on adolescent identity, they offer implications for the development of adolescent literacy and literacy instruction. The literacy curriculum offered in our schools should be challenging and responsive, putting adolescents' literate interests and abilities first and helping them read the world in new ways.

Commonsense developmental conceptions of adolescents as peer-governed, raging-hormonal, imperfect adults in transition provide an easy rationale for the teacher-centered, authoritarian schooling practices many youth face in today's public schools. Until these traditional conceptualizations of adolescence are disrupted, public schools will continue to offer pedagogical and curricular approaches that have been called into suspicion by the books reviewed here.

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