Who is an Adult? How Does the Definition Affect Our Practice?

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Introduction

As a child, I had a clear definition of an adult. S/he was tall, probably married, at least 21 years old, and legally permitted to vote, drive an automobile, and drink alcoholic beverages. As an educator or adult, however, I find that childhood definition has blurred considerably. This presentation brings together a host of measures of adulthood for consideration. It is hoped that the complexity of the answer to the initial question, "Who is an adult?" will assist practitioners and researchers in the planning and execution of their work.

Legal

I chose to begin the discussion from a legal perspective because the legal age should define who is entitled to adult education services in the United States. But first, a warning. Any discussion of legality must be understood in the context of the US educational system. Much of the legal power related to education resides with the individual states. This means that the remarks in this paper represent average or typical situations. Further confusing the issue is the fact that each state determines how much local control is permitted. This caveat must be considered when any statement concerning legality is read in this paper. While what I say holds true for the majority of cases it may not be true for a particular county or district within an individual state.

Federal law mandates that at age 18 citizens of the United States can vote (Brunner, Borgna, 1998). Legal residents of the United States who are 18 can own property and enter into contractual agreements. They can also attend adult education classes. A typical catalogue of courses offered for adults states as its admissions requirement "Adult vocational education classes are open to all persons eighteen years of age or older who have graduated or left an elementary or secondary school system." (Ocean County Vocational-Technical Schools, 1998) In practice, either or neither of these criteria may be waived by the local board of education.

By contrast, students who have parental consent may leave the juvenile educational system at age 16. No document of completion is issued unless they have fulfilled the requirements for a diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Most students who choose to leave school at 16 therefore lack the credentials needed for meaningful employment. Once they have dropped out of the secondary system these students may choose to return to that system until they are 21 years old or they

may apply to the local board of education for admission to the adult high school despite their youth.

Thus, students as young as 16 could participate in adult education activities.

Age 16 shows up in several other legal measures of adulthood in the United States. In 23 states, individuals who are 16 can hold a regular driver's license. States which permit driving prior to age 16 generally do so with restrictions such as driving during daylight hours or a requirement that a regularly licensed driver be in the vehicle. Many states, New Jersey included, restrict licensing until 17 or even 18. Sixteen, however, is the most common driving age across states (World Almanac Books, 1998). Marriage, it could be argued, should be a measure of adulthood. Most states permit 16 year olds to marry with parental consent (World Almanac Books, 1998). Child labor laws distinguish between those who are 16 and younger workers. Sixteen year old workers are protected from work deemed dangerous such as the operation of power equipment or the driving of a motor vehicle (Department of Health and Human Services, undated). The sixteen year old, then, is permitted to leave school, marry with parental consent, but is restricted from many of the more lucrative areas of employment until s/he reaches the age of 18.

Fourteen is the one final age which shows up in legal discussion. It is the age at which children may work outside of a family business or farm(Department of Health and Human Services, undated). It is also the age at which most states permit adult prosecution for criminal acts (Landers, 1998). A defendant is usually judged to be a juvenile until 18. However, the prosecution can request an adult indictment for children as young as 14. Sadly, this has become a major legal issue in the United States because of recent tragedies involving murders allegedly perpetrated by minors. The definition of the juvenile justice system is under examination and the answer to the question "Who is an adult?" from the point of view of criminal intent and responsibility may change.

Social/Cultural

Cultures and societies have traditional benchmarks which delineate the child from the adult in that society. Upon review, these measures conform more to the low-end age of 14 than to the legal majority age of 18 discussed in the previous section. The major religions of the West and Near East align with the early age. Both Judaism and Islam set the age of majority at 13 for boys and 12 for girls (Sachs, 1998). Confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church, although not defined as a rite of passage, tends to be administered at puberty(O.Malley, 1995). Local dioceses establish their own guidelines but, for children born into and raised in the faith, the minimum age is twelve or the "age of discernment" (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1994). In the United States, common practice is to confirm when the children are in eighth grade, that is, when they are thirteen or fourteen years old.

Secular cultures also recognize special ages. Latin Americans celebrate a Quinceanera when a female reaches the age of fifteen. This can be quite an extravagant celebration

beginning with a special Mass followed by a dinner and dance on the scale of a formal wedding party. A more typical North American benchmark is the "Sweet Sixteen" party for a girl. These too can be elaborate but are often celebrated by a small party or barbecue to which friends are invited. High society still maintains the custom of a debutante ball where girls in their eighteenth year "come out" into society (Post, 1997).

One traditional social measure of adulthood is the age at which an individual leaves the family home and begins to live on his/her own. In the United States, this age has actually been creeping upwards in recent years. Some explanations offered are the increase of the cost of living on one's own, substantial college loan debt, and a realization that the family home offers luxuries not affordable on a novice's salary. Colleagues attending this ALM presentation concurred that this is an international trend. In academic circles, there is an increase in the number of years which students take to complete a baccalaureate degree. This results in the age of graduating seniors moving towards 23 or 24 rather than the 21 or 22 of their parents' generation. If we take the definition of adult offered by Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), namely that adults are "persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status" the benchmark of 25 which is often used in adult education circles best describes an adult as a recent college graduates in his/her first job and possibly living on his/her own at last.

Moral

Three of the major moral theorists are Piaget, Kohlberg, and Gilligan. The work of Piaget is, in fact, a foundation the work of the other two. Jean Piaget observed children from infancy until adolescence. Based on his observations, he determined that the moral judgment of a child matured at puberty and he labeled that stage of development "distributive justice". The adolescent child, in making moral judgments, takes into account the varying degrees of responsibility of the individual involved in the critical situation (Piaget, 1965, Boden, 1980). The findings of Piaget tie neatly into the traditional "age of discernment" upon which the major religious rites of passage pivot. He did not work with adults and, for Piaget, the distributive justice represented the final stage of moral development of a person.

Lawrence Kohlberg replicates the adolescent findings of Piaget and expands that research into the area of adult development. Kohlberg defines four stages of moral development in the post-childhood period. Akin to Piaget's distributive justice stage is Kohlberg's third stage where the individual internalizes the rules and expectations of the family or peer group. This is followed in later adolescence by a fourth stage when the individual internalized the rules and expectations of the greater society of which s/he is a member. With the approach or onset of adulthood, he then details additional stages although a minority of adults reach the fifth, a stage where fundamental moral principles may override the laws and regulations of the larger society. While a sixth stage is defined, there is disagreement among those who have studied Kohlberg's work as to whether he provided clear evidence of its existence.

The adult who has reached stage six has searched for, and lives according to, a personal set of moral principles which may follow or digress from the society in which s/he lives and works (Kavathatzopoulos, 1991) .

Carol Gilligan began researching moral development with Kohlberg in the early 1970's. When she began to expand the research samples to include women Gilligan felt that her findings parted ways with those arrived at by earlier researchers who had drawn conclusions based on exclusively male samples. In her book *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan argues that the stages of moral development of women differ strikingly from those delineated by Kohlberg. According to her, the question of morality for women is one of learning to recognize the relationships affected by a moral decision and to balance the needs of the deciding individual with the needs of those affected by the decision. The resulting "best" decision is therefore situational and differs for each individual. While her research ties again to the maturation at puberty, there are no sharp stages of development, rather a growing awareness of personal responsibility on the part of the maturing individual (Gilligan, 1993). In a recent lecture commemorating the anniversary of the death of Kohlberg, Gilligan raises additional issues which challenge the traditional samples which formed the basis of accepted adult development models. She argues for research to explore the moral development path of non-white and of homosexual individuals before offering a theory of adult development which claims to represent all adults (Gilligan, 1998).

Cognitive Development

Jean Piaget is perhaps best known for his work in cognitive development. At about the same age when he found a sense of distributive justice surfacing in adolescents, he perceived an ability to think abstractly about items and issues within the child's experience. Piaget termed this cognitive stage "formal operations". The child who had reached the formal operations stage was capable of thinking and arguing using deductive logic. S/he could consider concrete situations and abstract generalizations from those situations. As in his moral stage theory, this was the final stage of cognitive development for the child (Boden, 1980).

Other cognitive theorists have suggested a postformal developmental stage (Commons, Armon, Richards, Schrader, Farrell, Tappan, and Bauer, 1989) In their research they describe the postformal individual as one with the ability to reconcile contradictions and understand that knowledge is temporary and subject to change. Vygotsky also studied cognition in adults but his research centered more on the social aspects of learning than on stages of development within the individual learner (Vygotsky, 1978).

Psychological

Several psychologists have presented developmental theories. For brevity sake I offer two for consideration. The first, and probably the best known, is Erik Erikson.

Erikson describes eight developmental stages throughout the life span each of which is expressed in terms of conflict. Upon entering adolescence, the youth struggles with the question of identity versus role confusion. A successful conclusion to this stage results in a young adult with a clear sense of his/her personal identity. From age nineteen to age twenty-five Erikson sees that person deciding between intimacy or isolation through experimentation with one or more intimate relationships. The decision results in the creation of a permanent intimate relationship. The next stage is a broad one, age twenty-five to fifty, and he terms it generativity versus stagnation. Individuals in this stage of life seek to identify ways to satisfy their need to be generative and to turn outward from themselves towards others. Erikson's final stage, reached at age fifty or later is described as a choice between ego integrity or despair, a comparison which attendees at this ALM presentation found to be rather harsh (Erikson, 1959). Essentially it is a decision on the part of the person to accept his/herself as s/he is. Those of us who are middle-aged often witness this struggle in acquaintances who experience a mid-life crisis and are confronting the question of who they are and how much they like the answer.

Jane Loevinger also speaks of stages, although her stages are not age-specific. Beginning in late childhood she describes six stages of adult development although a given individual may not, and probably will not, reach the higher stages. In late childhood Loevinger records a conformist stage where the individual identifies his/her own welfare with that of the group and behaves according to group expectations. That is followed by a stage where there is an increase in self-awareness and acceptance of individual differences and shadings of feelings and opinions. The conscientious stage sees the individual forming his/her own rules and ideals and attempting to live by them. Both of these stages echo Kohlberg's Stage 3 and 4. According to Loevinger, the next stage, individualistic, focuses on the question of dependence and independence the resolution of which leads to the autonomous stage. An autonomous individual is fully independent and has the capacity to acknowledge and deal with inner conflict. At the final stage, integration, the person has reconciled conflicts which arose in the autonomous stage and has given up the quest for the unattainable (Bee, 1992, Loevinger, 1976).

Application to Practice

During this presentation an attendee asked the question "Why do we care about this information?" My response is twofold. First, as a practitioner I experienced this information in an anecdotal and intuitive way. When I then studied the theory discussed here, I found that it explained and gave credibility to what I had seen in my classroom. As a researcher I need a rich background of theory upon which I can build research projects. As specialists in the field of adult mathematics education we should be aware of this developmental diversity when structuring our classroom environments and planning a curriculum. Each adult student has his/her own profile made up of the chronological, moral, cognitive, and psychological stages s/he has reached.

Clearly the answer to the question, "Who is an adult?" has many facets. The eighteen year old single mother of two taking algebra for a high school diploma has a different profile from the forty year old secretary who is finally realizing a dream of getting a college degree. Both qualify for adult education and may inhabit the same class. As their instructors I believe we need to recognize their similarities and differences and provide a mathematical environment rich enough for each student to be comfortable and successful. One aid to achievement of that goal is a sound foundation of adult learning theory. This presentation offers only a superficial tour of that theory with the hope that attendees will pursue further investigations on their own.

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