

FOUNDATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Research Summary: Developmental Foundations for Young Adult Success

Source: Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C. A., Ehrlich, S. B., Johnson, D. W., Dickson, S., Heath, R., & Mayo, A. (2014, February). A Framework for Developing Young Adult Success in the 21st Century: White Paper - Defining Young Adult Success. University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Working Paper. Revised November 2014.

DEVELOPMENTAL FOCUS: GROUP-BASED IDENTITY

Stage Description



As young teens enter the middle grades, they are very concerned with “developing a sense of group cohesion” with peers. The peer group affiliation drives development of foundational components such as mindsets and an awareness of self, as well as values derived from their peer group. Teens “look to their peers for acceptance, importance, and unity. Within the context of building peer relations, adolescents learn loyalty, empathy, criticism, and rejection.” The sense of belonging they seek shapes adolescents’ early identity, particularly their social identity as being autonomous from their parents and family.

Over time, young teens begin to develop a “fixed” mindset, as opposed to a growth mindset; that is, they tend to attribute performance increasingly to ability, or at least to see ability as a more formidable constraint on their performance. These emerging mindsets have implications for students’ success as they navigate the transition into high school.

For a significant number of students, their performance attributions, coupled with their doubts about the malleability of intelligence, cause them to withdraw effort just when the academic context requires both more effort and better use of appropriate strategies for learning. The emphasis on social comparison in the middle grades also sets up a context in which less prepared or lower performing students do not want to call attention to their learning struggles and “may adopt behaviors and strategies to avoid failures—devaluing challenging tasks, self-handicapping, and withdrawing effort altogether.”

DEVELOPMENTAL FOCUS: INDIVIDUATED IDENTITY

Stage Description



Youth in high school, roughly ages 15 to 18, are in what is known as middle adolescence. During the high school years, the major developmental tasks include discovering a sense of values and an individuated identity. These rely on developing positive mindsets and knowledge of the self that is differentiated from others. In contrast to earlier stages, having a sense of personal values emerges as a self-defining characteristic for middle adolescents. Whereas young children define themselves in terms of concrete attributes and middle-schoolers define themselves by a peer group, high school-aged youth form a much more independent sense of the things they place value in.

Teenagers in this age range experience a higher level of cognitive functioning, which gives them greater capacity to identify and reflect on what they value about themselves, their peers and family members, and the world writ-large. They “begin to view themselves in terms of personal beliefs and standards, and less in terms of social comparisons.” In contrast with early adolescence, when youth define themselves by the norms and interests of their peer groups, middle adolescents begin asking “big questions” about themselves, their values, and their place in the world.

They are seeking an individuated identity—a sense of who they are independent of others around them. Young people in this age range “are beginning to find their own voice, beliefs, and values; and they are beginning to set and act on personal goals. They are learning to invest in their own learning experiences, productivity, and creativity; and they are forging the enduring motivational structures that will carry them into adulthood.” These developments play a crucial role in how youth begin to define their individuated identities, and ultimately how well they are able to consolidate their various “selves” into an integrated identity.

Neurological changes during middle adolescence lead to lower levels of self-regulation, resulting in a time of increased risk-taking. Their ability to overcome self-regulation challenges will inform the extent to which they are able to develop and exhibit important competencies, and high school performance will inform mindsets about the self and the self as a student.

In the process of identity development, adolescents need to experiment with new roles and responsibilities and try on new images of the self. They need to be exposed to and explore “future possible selves” that they might not have previously imagined for themselves, and these opportunities will be fostered or constrained by the school context they are in. Middle adolescents need opportunities to generate data about the self in response to the questions that most motivate them: “Who am I?” “What do I have to offer to others?” and “What can I do in the world?” Without support for this kind of exploration, adolescents in the high school years are not able to fulfill the developmental tasks before them. The challenge is in finding productive outlets and opportunities for their developing capacities.

High school adolescents recognize seeming discrepancies in the self, and may describe themselves in terms of behavior that can differ according to differing social contexts, for example, being shy at school, gregarious with friends, and respectful toward parents. As teenagers continue to mature, they report fewer such discrepancies and a more consistent view of themselves across contexts.

Studies also show that “adolescents evaluate themselves both globally and along several distinct dimensions—academics, athletics, appearance, social relations, and moral conduct.” The ability to recognize these various “selves,” and understand that they can both be distinct from one another and still contribute to a single identity, is the basis for what happens in the next stage of development: developing an integrated identity.

Note: OCR-style artifacts in the pasted text were normalized for readability while preserving the substance of the provided summary.

