

Educating Romeo and his Teacher

SHASHIDHAR JAGADEESHAN



I am a 17-year-old adolescent male. I am sure this very statement gives you the heebie-jeebies! My parents and teachers are highly educated and have no qualms in sharing all the latest research on adolescents, plus their own home-grown wisdom about teenagers, with me. Let us begin with biology. They tell me that my body is going through tremendous change, mainly of the hormonal. Not only is there an increase in the concentration level of testosterone in my body, there are also irregularities in its cycling pattern. These apparently have direct and indirect effects on my body and behavior, such as the increase in the strength that I feel, how I experience some things intensely, my mood swings and my 'blooming' sexuality.

The neurobiology freaks in the adult fraternity are also very quick to tell me that not only is my body on overdrive, my brain is involved too! Apparently there are very important changes happening in my brain. There are two culprits involved in this. One is the limbic area and the other is the prefrontal/parietal cortex. The former is responsible for social and emotional responses (feeling excited and charged when I am with my peers) and the latter for cognitive control, stuff like thinking ahead and impulse control (for example, choosing to wear a helmet when I drive a two-wheeler). By my age the limbic area (part of the 'old brain' evolutionarily speaking) is more fully developed than the prefrontal/parietal cortices (part of the 'new brain'), which will continue to develop well into my adulthood. Apparently the neural connections between the two areas are not yet complete. Moreover, hormonal changes in my body seem to impact the limbic system. One way in which all this manifests is that I somehow feel completely in control of situations and cannot understand why adults are so unwilling to take risks! They always seem to worry about some consequence in the future.

Boy! I can see how this can get some of us into trouble, like the other day when two of my friends pushed off for a walk into the forest without telling anyone. They left at around 6 pm, calculating that they would be back well before dinner at 7 pm. As you can guess, they got lost and it suddenly turned very dark. Of course, they were not wimpish enough to think of carrying things like torches. The only trouble was, since there are bears around, they did get a bit scared and started shouting, and the whole campus was roused in order to rescue them. When asked if they had thought about the risks involved, they simply said they were sure they would be back soon and nothing would go wrong.

What about the sociologists and behavioral psychologists? They love quoting the following passage by Anna Freud (daughter of Sigmund Freud, that troublemaker):

Adolescents are excessively egoistic, regarding themselves as the centre of the universe and sole object of interest, and yet at no time in later life are they capable of so much self-sacrifice and devotion. They form the most passionate love relations, only to break them off as abruptly as they began them. On the one hand they throw themselves enthusiastically into the life of the community and, on the other, they have an overpowering longing for solitude. They oscillate between blind submission to some self-chosen leader and defiant rebellion against any and every authority. They are selfish and materially minded and at the same time full of lofty idealism. They are ascetic but will suddenly plunge into instinctual indulgence of the most primitive character. At times their behavior to other people is rough and inconsiderate, yet they themselves are extremely touchy. Their moods veer between light-hearted optimism and the blackest pessimism. Sometimes they will work with indefatigable enthusiasm and other times they are sluggish and apathetic.

I must give her some credit! It does seem that we adolescents are like that. But perhaps there is too much of a negative slant to her description, part of what my psychology teacher tells me is a 'storm and stress' model of teenagers. It is true that the strong image adults have of us, and their use of biology to explain away our behavior, can get on our nerves. We feel compelled to somehow fulfill their worst pictures of us!

However, I do believe Erik Erikson got it right when he said that adolescence is dominated by the need to form one's identity. One of my classmates wrote an article entitled, 'It's all about me!' in our school magazine

and here is part of what she wrote:

Me, myself and I—this is what life is at fourteen. What people think of me, how I look, how good I am at whatever I do, what kind of music I listen to, the kind of clothes I wear, everything is I. How happy I am and sometimes how sad I am.

I feel adults are also like us, but I agree that we are a bit more touchy about our self image, others' images of us, what others think of our images of others and so on! Of course, apart from identity formation, sex and sexuality is a major preoccupation—not just the physical aspect, but the social aspects as well. The media and the hyped-up sexual atmosphere we live in don't help us either.

Finally, there is this whole business of autonomy. In an year I will be eighteen, I will be eligible to vote, and in many cultures, to work and earn a livelihood. If I was a girl I could get married. Yet adults don't feel I am ready for many things. Sex of course is out of the question. I must confess though that the thought of entering the adult world is both exciting and scary. I will be the master of my own life, and in today's world, given my socioeconomic background, the world is literally at my feet. There are so many creative and meaningful career options I could pursue, new relationships to be formed and so many adventures to look forward to. However, sometimes when I look at the future from a different angle, and the world I will inherit, it is very scary and depressing. Our generation will face very big challenges. Every day in some corner of the earth I read about war. Global warming is no longer a prediction but seems a reality. Materially, there seems to be no end to the comforts we can have, but I see and read about so many poor people. Many people I know of seem to have mental health issues and I read somewhere that those are on the increase.

I am left with some uneasy questions. Am I ready to face such a world, have I been educated not only to earn a livelihood but also to navigate the world—the real and the emotional?

I am a 46-year-old middle-aged educator. One of my main jobs is to create a meaningful educational programme for 15- to 18-year olds. I feel educating young adults is one of the greatest challenges that educators

face. Our young friend's self portrayal (!) surely poses many challenges for us and demands a sensitive response. Most education systems I see around me seem woefully inadequate. They seem only concerned with somehow getting students ready to earn a livelihood. They ignore the biological, social and psychological changes that adolescents are going through, and end up desensitising young people. Yet these are the very young people who will create the societies of tomorrow. In not recognizing this vital area of education, perhaps we are missing a great opportunity.

You might well turn around and ask me: so what ideas do you have? I will be sharing ideas that have arisen from our attempts to educate young adults at Centre For Learning (CFL) and am confident that many of these ideas can be tried out in other settings with suitable modification.

Dialogue and ownership

The cornerstone of our education is dialogue. We feel the only way we can reach young people is by keeping all channels of communication open to earn each other's trust. Dialogue happens at many levels: there are many informal one-on-one sessions with students where personal issues are discussed. Then there are sessions devoted exclusively to talking about more fundamental issues of life and living. I will go into this at some depth later in the article. Over the last two years we have also started a discussion session with the entire senior school (students from the age of 14 to 18). Here, specific issues regarding life in a community are discussed. We encourage students to feel a sense of ownership for the school, so all aspects of the school are discussed. The attempt is really to listen to and understand each other's perspectives on matters ranging from norms of behavior, punishment and consequence to sexuality, and from these discover what it is to create a school together. These dialogues have definitely helped soften the adult-student divide.

The sense of ownership naturally extends to students taking responsibility for their own education. When they join the senior school, we ask them to do a thought experiment where they are asked to project what they feel should be the ingredients of their education, their learning goals and all the variety of things that they would like to explore in the senior school. Of course it may not be possible to fulfill all their dreams (for example, they cannot pursue underwater snorkeling unless of course your school is in the Andamans!), but the idea is that we make them partners in the process of their own education rather than mere consumers. Then they do not have the luxury of picking

and choosing what they like and dislike, but have to understand that their education will consist of many experiences, some of which they may enjoy and some which they may not. This approach also responds to the growing need for autonomy that students now demonstrate. We also respond to this need by making them responsible for some key areas of the functioning of the school, for example the sports and fitness programme, helping with younger children, helping with maintenance and the upkeep of the school, cooking meals for the whole school and so on.

Respecting (and disrespecting!) biology

At CFL we have begun to respect the biological changes that young people undergo and would like as far as possible to work with these changes rather than oppose and impose our own demands on them. Research demonstrates that teenagers need more sleep and that their circadian rhythms are different from adults. We have responded to this by not demanding that they wake at unearthly hours, but being strict about the amount of sleep that they get. It is clear that their bodies are getting stronger and they need a very demanding sports programme. So a significant part of every day (on average 11/2 hrs) is kept aside for physical activity. It has also been said that physical exercise is an excellent part of preventive mental health care. Their need for adventure and risk-taking is addressed by going on treks into the neighbouring forest, and at least one trek to the Himalayas during their senior school.

One interesting point needs to be made here. While respecting biological truths about the growing brain and body, in some instances we do not yield to these without a fight! We have also read that there is a fair degree of plasticity in the brain, and we are therefore very interested in exploring educational experiences that will challenge these young people optimally if not unrealistically. For instance, while we do not insist that 15-year-olds wake up at 5 am every morning, we do challenge them about their need for adventure and the risks to which they expose themselves, their friends and the community. Accepting that the body and brain have certain tendencies (at any age, for that matter) need not prevent us from discovering whether we can, through observation and attention, behave differently. Speaking speculatively, is it possible that neural pathways correlated with well-being are encouraged to form, while those that do not are discouraged?

Exploring interests and the discipline of learning

Cognitively, young adults are capable of higher levels of learning and abstraction. So we have a demanding and rigorous academic programme. The programme aims at exposing them to different ways of thinking and learning about the world, be it in the sciences or the humanities. It is important that care is taken not only with the syllabus and the content of their subjects, but also with how they are evaluated. A dry syllabus with pointless exams is a sure recipe to turn off anyone, let alone teenagers. The academic programme also aims to hone and train their thinking skills, their ability to ask good questions and be skeptical.

We do face a serious challenge at this stage. How do we motivate students in the absence of reward and punishment? Their inability to foresee and anticipate consequences in the distant future definitely makes this task rather difficult. There is also a gender issue here for in our experience, in general, boys find it harder than girls to be disciplined and self-motivated. However, we do not feel that this justifies the systemic and systematic use of fear or rewards as a tool for motivation because in the long run it does more damage than good.

We hope that by the end of senior school programme they have an inkling of their interests and passions. We encourage them to explore their different interests (these could range through the whole gamut of human activities) at various levels, they are exposed to talks by experts in their field and also get to meet and interact with people from a variety of backgrounds and vocations and people whose passion has led them to live extraordinary lives. The last term of their senior school is spent apprenticing in an area of their interest. However, not all children may be fortunate enough to discover such an interest. For them, as also for those who may have an inkling, it is equally important to have a sense of self-worth and confidence. This is born not out of one's talent but out of confidence in one's capacity to learn, and more importantly the discipline, to fulfill the demands that this learning makes. One idea that worked well in this regard was to get some of the senior students to work and earn for a short period during the summer holidays. The jobs they undertook ranged from being an assistant to a car mechanic to working in a mass tailoring outfit, earning princely sums of Rs 40 to 100 a day! They were suddenly encountering a totally different reality, meeting and interacting with people not normally part of their social milieu. They had to realize that there

was no question of postponing the day's work. They had to complete a given task in a given period of time, no excuses. I would not recommend this activity beyond a brief period because it has the potential to backfire too!

Education and the world

We believe education is the key to the regeneration of society. It is only a deeply compassionate human being who can respond to the tremendous challenges of modern life. What can education do to 'build' compassionate and caring people? We do not claim to have any answers to this rather urgent demand. We feel that we can begin by learning about the world around us, about ourselves and see the connection between the crisis in human consciousness and the crisis in the world today.

As a part of learning about the world we have a general studies programme. The programme has two components, environmental and social. The environmental component has two aims: to develop in students a deep intimacy with their immediate living neighborhood, and to have a critical understanding of the state of the globe today. The social component aims at bringing students in contact with issues and people not normally part of their milieu. Both these components have opened up many ideas for us as educators. But we feel we are on the right track so far: making students feel a part of the web of life, and being sensitive to the fate of a large part of humanity. Another key ingredient in helping students to learn and relate to our social and physical environment is our annual excursion. Here students and teachers travel and live simply, meet people from different walks of life and encounter a variety of cultures and habitats.

Can we explore with young adults a different kind of learning, one of which *all* humans are equally capable? It is clear that as a species we are capable of learning many things, from mathematics to music, but mastery in the various fields of learning is not evenly distributed among humans. Of course, it is enough if some members of the species learn some of the skills for humans to survive. In any case, not all of us can learn all that has been learnt and mastered by humankind as a whole. However, some have hinted at a different kind of learning, about oneself and about the whole of humanity and consciousness. This learning to me is absolutely necessary if I am to lead an intelligent life. Dialogue is a very important factor in this learning, something I mentioned earlier. We set aside time every week to discuss what can be termed fundamental questions about life. Students are encouraged to

be skeptical and not believe or accept anything that they are told, to explore the art of observing oneself, to be aware of all the movements and forces that shape our thinking and being. Quiet time and spaces are set aside so that a non-verbal exploration of this learning is possible.

I hope that in this article I have shared the various possibilities in educating young adults, and that some of the ideas are adaptable to different contexts. I also hope I have not inadvertently conveyed that at the end of our senior school programme we produce *bodhisattvas*! In fact, on a daily basis, we are confronted with the enormous challenge of our own conditioning and that of our students. We humbly realize that no matter how well thought out the educational experiences may be, they may only add to the sense of the ‘experienter’ in the student. Self-interest somehow has the capacity to wipe out the best of our intentions. Not to end on a pessimistic note, I just realize that the idea of self-interest is a great topic for tomorrow’s dialogue session!

Let’s Play

SHARAD JAIN



As a sports teacher the first thing that struck me, or should I say shocked me, was that sports was not a time that everyone looked forward to. In fact, when I started out I was surprised that almost fifty percent of the students who I was to work with, did not like the class at all and their questions ranged from, “Do we all

have to come?”, “Why is it important for us?”, “What’s the big deal, it’s my body!” to “This is not even my sixth subject”. It would not be wrong to say that there were other students who were enthusiastic, almost fanatical about this class. They hated even a minute taken away from it. As they got off the bus they would ask,