Feminist Poststructuralism and the Possibilities of Theory in Transforming Middle Level Teacher Education Programs

By Natalie G. Adams

In a recent themed issue of the *Middle School Journal* entitled "Reforming Middle Grades Teacher Preparation," the editor asserted that the programs featured in this themed issue about reforming middle grades teacher preparation do not "indulge the interests of tenured nematodes[1] [nor do they] perpetuate the narrow university-based programs that have been, and continue to be, characteristic of teacher education. [Rather, the focus of the articles are] field based attempts to revitalize teacher education" (Erb, 1995, p. 2). The implication of these comments is that **theories** of curriculum, learning, and teaching (or perhaps the theoretical perspectives of "tenured nematodes") have no place in determining the landscape of middle level teacher education programs.

However, the danger in dismissing the importance of theory in shaping middle level teacher education programs is the possibility of reproducing an ideology that requires prospective teachers to be little more than passive consumers of knowledge about the best "techniques" and "tools" to meet the needs of early adolescents, thereby ignoring issues of

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power, politics, and social transformation. Britzman (1991) critiques this kind of teacher education as follows:

> Method courses that focus on mechanistic applications and view knowledge as a form of technical rationality implicitly encourage conservatism among student teachers in two ways. First, knowledge is presented as an accomplished fact, separate from discursive practices and the relations of power it supposes. Second, the curriculum and its presentation are not considered in dialogic relationship to the lives of students and teachers.... Both knowledge and students are repressed when methods courses do little more than aid the student teacher in getting large groups of students through the same lesson in a prescribed period of time. (p. 47)

In this article, I am asking the reader to indulge this nontenured-nonnematode college professor in her discussion of the *possibilities of feminist poststructuralist theory* in improving middle level teacher education programs that prepare prospective teachers to be what Henry Giroux (1993) has called "transformative intellectuals" committed to the work of making the school and society a more just and caring place for all students.

I do not intend to delve into great detail about feminist theory or poststructuralist theory.[2] However, a brief summary of feminist poststructuralism is necessary to contextualize the changes made in an undergraduate middle grades methods course based on my own interpretation of this theoretical perspective. In very simplistic terms, feminist poststructuralist theory rejects claims of authority that have their basis in totalizing theories or master narratives. Rather, feminist poststructuralists insist that constructions of the world and the "truths" that govern the world have to be grounded in the specific, partial, and different contexts of peoples' lives, communities, and cultures. All categories of knowledge are historical and social constructions and connected to issues of power since knowledge has always been used both to communicate and to control.

Essential to a feminist poststructuralist perspective is the acknowledgement that our subjective identities are always culturally inscribed. Thus, feminist poststructuralists celebrate plurality while emphasizing the politics of race, gender, class, and ethnicity (Alcoff, 1986; Hawkesworth, 1986; Weedon, 1987). The changes that I have implemented in the middle grades methods course I teach reflect my committment to a feminist poststructuralist examination of adolescence, middle level education, and identity based on three guiding principles: (1) the need to question totalizing claims of truth about adolescence; (2) the need to deconstruct categories that present fixed realities of what constitutes best practices in middle school education; and (3) the need to acknowledge the multiple subjectivities that constitute our teacher-self.

"What's Theory Got to Do with Teaching?"

In the first few minutes of the first day of class I ask my undergraduate students

(all of whom are taking my class as their last middle grades class before student teaching) to respond in a free-write to the following question: "Is adolescence a biological or a social construct?" I am typically greeted with blank faces and stilled pens. After a few moments of silence, usually one brave soul will ask: "Is this MG 492?" "Yes," I reply. "Well," responds the student, "what's this got to do with teaching our units?"

Herein lies the challenge for me: How do I teach a methods course without perpetuating a technocratic and rationalist view of teaching—one that forces pre-service teachers to divorce their personal lives from their teaching/professional lives? How can I teach my students to deconstruct the master narratives of both adolescence and middle level education so that they will be better teachers of a diverse population of students? How can I foster in my students an awareness of the significance of race, class, and gender in the way individuals experience adolescence? How can I emphasize the historical, social, political, and cultural factors responsible for shaping our present form of schooling adolescents? How can I encourage my students to see themselves as agents of change as well as producers of their own knowledge?

In shifting the emphasis from prescriptive mandates and mechanistic tools to issues about race, gender, power, politics, and social transformation, I am asking my students to deconstruct the very discourses upon which most of public schooling (including much of the middle school movement) is based.

Deconstructing the Discourse of Adolescence

According to Luke and Gore (1992), "the poststructuralist agenda focuses on the deconstruction of taken for granted historical structures of socio-cultural organizations" (p. 5). Central to my poststructuralist agenda in this methods course is to deconstruct the dominant discourse of adolescence by making apparent that the meanings we give to adolescence or the qualities associated with adolescence are not derived from natural law. As illuminated by Mead's (1928) study of Samoan girls, the meanings of adolescence vary from culture to culture as well as within the discourses of different social institutions (Ianni, 1989). One of my major goals in teaching preservice teachers is to move them beyond discussions of adolescence as simply a developmental stage based on scientific objectivity toward a recognition that adolescence, like all categories of knowledge, is a social and historical construction. I urge my students to question the following: Why has adolescence been characterized as a time of uncontrollable behavior, rebellion, and idealism? Whose voices have been omitted in the creation of a discourse of adolescence? How do schools through their control of time, knowledge, and power reinforce our traditional understandings of adolescence as a time of storm and stress? What does the construction of adolescence reveal about power structures in our society as a whole?

Since I want the focus of my class to shift from an emphasis on prescriptive

mandates about the correct way to write behavioral objectives or the essential elements of a "true" middle school to the adolescents whom my students will be teaching, the first reading assignment for these preservice teachers comes not from any of the standard middle school texts nor from any scholarly educational journal. Rather, they read five articles from a themed issue of the *Utne Reader* entitled, "Today's Teens: Diss Mythed and Totally Pissed." The titles of these articles suggest how adolescence and schooling are connected to larger political, social, and cultural issues: "The Disease is Adolescence"; "Throw Away the Key: Juvenile Offenders are the Willie Hortons of the 90's"; "The Comfort of Being Sad: Kurt Cobain and the Politics of Damage"; "The Age of Endarkenment: Listening to the Psychic Cacophony of Adolescence"; and "Rights of Passage: If Adolescence Is a Disease, Initiation Is a Cure." These articles, written from a variety of perspectives, highlight not only the myriad problems facing adolescents today but also the ways in which adults and social institutions have decided to "deal" with the adolescent problem. These articles make real for my students the need to understand adolescence as a social construct integrally connected to issues of race, class, culture, and gender.

I follow this highly interactive discussion of the articles in the *Utne Reader* with an examination of the history of adolescence, focusing in particular on the work of Gillis (1981), Ketts (1977), and Springhall (1986) who argue that adolescence was "invented" in the nineteenth century largely as a middle class phenomenon. I share with my students that G. Stanley Hall's two-thousand-paged treatise on adolescence (1904) is largely responsible for the negative connotations associated with adolescence, for it was he who took what was a middle class notion of adolescence and extended it to all classes by positing a theory of adolescence that was culturally universal and thus, an inescapable stage of human development—marked by "storm and stress."

We then explore the connections of Hall's institutionalization of adolescence with the political, social, and economic changes that were occurring in the United States at the turn of the century and their impact on schooling for adolescents. Educational reformers of the early twentieth century embraced Hall's view of adolescence as a traumatic and turbulent stage of life and used it to justify schools assuming primary responsibility for preparing adolescents for adult life. What emerged was a philosophy of education (still with us today) that situated school as a distinct and separate entity from both family and from society at large (Musgrove, 1964). Schools emerged as forms of social control under the guise of "protecting" youth; however, according to Musgrove (1969), by protecting adolescents, an inferior status was (and still is) bestowed upon them.

This examination of the history of adolescence and public schooling illuminates in particular the impact of social class in not only how different individuals experience adolescence but how adolescents come to be labeled as "abnormal" adolescents. Part of our class readings focus on the experiences of working class

youth of the early twentieth century who did not "adjust nearly so well as middle class youth to the model of adolescence that schools and youth organizations presented to them" (Gillis, 1981, p. 177). Child labor laws and compulsory education laws were created to force adolescents (many of whom had full time jobs) into a protectorate state; schools were supposedly going to prepare students for the real world by removing them from the real world, thereby protecting them from the evils of society. Unsurprisingly working class youth and their families strongly resisted the school's imposition into their lives, viewing this forced removal of teens from the market through coercive legislation as severely threatening their economic livelihood. Undeniably, from its very inception in the 1800s, the dominant discourse of adolescence that shaped normative understandings of adolescence has omitted the experiences of working class youth who were not exempt from the world of work, who did not have large amounts of leisure time, and who viewed institutional control as a threat to their very existence (Gillis, 1981; Musgrove, 1964; Troen, 1976).

As a feminist, however, I feel compelled to point out to my students that most of the historical accounts of adolescence have omitted the experiences of girls. Thus, I bring into my class the work of Carol Dyhouse (1981) and other female historians and sociologists (*e.g.*, Alexander, Hudson, and Ruiz) who have demonstrated the inadequacies of historical accounts of adolescence that only represent half of the adolescent population. As Dyhouse (1981) indicates in discussing working class females in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, "many of these women never experienced anything resembling a state of adolescence at all.... Girls were much less likely than their brothers to have been allowed a period of legitimate freedom, however transitory, removed from adult surveillance and unencumbered by responsibility for domestic chores" (p. 119). Furthermore, as both the work of Dyhouse (1981) and Hudson (1984) illuminates, the discourse of adolescence founded in masculine ways of knowing often works in contradiction to the discourse of femininity.

As these preservice teachers begin their three-week teaching experience in a local middle school, they record in their reflective journals the ways in which their school both challenges and reinforces the understanding of adolescence as a stage of life in which students need controlling. They make note of how the schools deal with issues of diversity. They write about the contradictions implicit in the school's attempt to emphasize race, class, and gender while simultaneously filtering out these same categories under the guise of "everybody's equal here."

By problematizing adolescence as a normative order and exploring it as a complex phenomenon largely dependent upon race, class, and gender as well as history and culture, I hope that these preservice teachers will view their prospective students as more than simply individuals who are "victims" of a certain developmental stage. Furthermore, adolescents, like all of us, live in a larger world; thus, their adolescent identities cannot be divorced from their raced, classed, or gendered

identity. The multiple and shifting identities that constitute who we are at given moments in time must be viewed in a larger context. Afterall, one is not simply an adolescent—one is simultaneously an African-American, middle-class, male, Catholic, heterosexual, Southern fourteen-year-old. Adolescent is but one of many identities middle school students have.

Disrupting the Discourse of Middle Level Education

This discussion of the dominant discourse of adolescence leads us into a discussion of middle level education. Early in the course, I ask students to compile a list of what they consider to be essential elements for improving schools for early adolescents. Reflecting information they have been taught in other classes in their preservice program, their lists include (almost without exception): advisory and exploratory programs, interdisciplinary instruction, teaming, and flexible scheduling. I then ask my students: Will the millions of at-risk middle school students fare any better in a middle school that has an advisory program, an exploratory program, and flexible scheduling if the school has not reconceptualized the fundamental "truths" upon which schooling for adolescence has been historically and traditionally based? Quite obviously, I want my students to move beyond simply regurgitating the essential elements of a "true" middle school to become aware of the political, social, and cultural context of schooling.

Implicit in the current middle school philosophy is the belief that early adolescence is a stage of development (different from both late childhood and late adolescence) in which all individuals progress in a liner, sequential fashion. Since all students presumably experience adolescence in a similar way (albeit at different times), programs and practices (*e.g.*, advisory programs, interdisciplinary instruction, exploratory programs, teaming) assumably can be designed that will collectively meet early adolescents' special age-related needs. Underlying most of these middle school programs and practices are assumptions steeped in the psychological findings of stage theorists such as Piaget (1952), Erickson (1963), and Kohlberg (1981) who purport to present a gender-, class-, and race-neutral explanation of the normative adolescent experience.

In trying to encourage prospective teachers to critique taken-for-granted assumptions about adolescence and schooling, I require them to read the work of Fine (1988), Fine and MacPherson (1992), Fordham (1993), and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) who stress the importance of contexualizing discussions of normative adolescence. I remind them that feminist psychologists such as Brown and Gilligan (1992) and Apter (1990) argue that the theories of psychological development upon which most of our associations about normative adolescent behavior are based are, in fact, theories of **male** adolescence. The reality is that girls experience adolescence differently than do boys just as poor children experience adolescence differently than do middle and upper class children.

During their first week of observing in a middle school, I ask these preservice students to obtain a copy of the school's philosophy. We examine these and discover that almost without exception these middle school philosophies include some statement that suggests that middle schools are supposed to attend to the unique academic, social, physical, and emotional needs of early adolescents. I then ask the students the following: "Do all students have the same academic, social, physical, and emotional needs?" A lively discussion usually ensues about the contradictions between the philosophy of most middle schools (that is, to attend to the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of each early adolescent) and the practices of those same schools.

During their actual teaching experience, they document the numerous ways in which their middle school attends to the assumed commonalities early adolescents share because of their age rather than the differences they have because of their race, class, and gender. They note such practices as students progressing through sixth, seventh, and eighth grade sitting in classes with similarly aged students, students learning from textbooks that are deemed academically appropriate for that age student, and students taking courses believed to be developmentally appropriate based on age.

After critically reflecting on their four weeks in a middle school, these pre-service teachers usually conclude that despite the sincere intentions of both administrators and teachers, individual identity in the middle school actually becomes translated into collective identity (*i.e.*, the early adolescent). There are simply too many children in most middle schools to make the "development of each child" a reality even with programs like advisory and exploratory.

Exploring Self, Students, and Schooling through Autobiography

In addition to encouraging preservice teachers to challenge and critique the discourses of adolescence and middle level education, I urge my students to write about their own personal experiences as adolescents and adolescent students. In explaining the importance of autobiography in teacher education, Graham (1991) asserts, "[The prime function of autobiography] is to make memory speak, to cause students to become increasingly conscious of the ties that bind them to culture and society, and to help them discover valuable aspects of their 'true' selves" (p. 153).

I try to model in my own interactions with my students that good teachers know their students—and more importantly, good teachers help their students know themselves and their world around them. As soon-to-be teachers of adolescents, I want my students to confront their own fears and myths about adolescence and adolescent students. Ventura (1994) argues that in Western cultures the gap between adults and adolescents is caused by the terror adults have in revisiting their own adolescence, opting instead to minimize and trivialize the feelings of adolescence:

What we cannot face when we cannot face the young is, plainly, ourselves. (And this is the song of families.) Our secrets, our compromises, our needs, our lacks, our failures, and our fear that we're going to fail again—all this stirs and starts to growl somewhere deep inside when the young look hard into our grown-up eyes. It's as though, in some dark way, they are privy to our secrets, even to what we don't know or want to know about ourselves and when they so much as glance toward those parts of us, oh, our old panics resurrect, those demons we thought we'd dealt with, grown out of, transcended, escaped—it only takes this goddamn kid, and the beasts awake. (p. 64)

By uncovering their own personal stories about adolescence and schooling, prospective teachers are able to situate their own life histories as a valid location for constructing meaning about teaching, learning, and adolescence. As highlighted in the following examples of students' writing, their personal stories about such issues as tracking, gender, and racial inequities in schooling, the sociocultural implications of physical development, and the invisibility of the quiet, "average" student, reveal much more convincingly than any textbook or journal article the very real problems facing early adolescents in today's society:

I believed that I was not smart enough to be placed in one of the top level groupings and thus I would never play in the band. I began to cry harder. At that moment, the assistant principal placed her hand on my shoulder and said, "it's not your fault you were born on the wrong side of the tracks." I was confused and did not understand what she was saying. I looked up at my mother. She was very angry and the corner of her eyes were filled with tears. (Black, 21 year-old female)

There were about 12 students in the class, three girls and nine boys. Mr. Meadows had a dislike for girls and he thought that they should not be in the [gifted] program. One of the other two girls took the brunt of his abuse at first. She was very outspoken and sort of a rebel. He did not like her because she would stand up for herself and us. He did not like me much either, because, although I was not as vocal as the other girl, I knew I was as smart as any boy in the class and deserved to be there just the same. He constantly put us down and told us we could not do the work as well as the boys and that we held the class up. He said we did not deserve to be in the class until we could prove to him that we were as smart as the boys.... Basically, he made the class hell for me and my only salvation was the other girl that he picked on more than me. About half way through the year she moved and I became his main target. He tormented me unmercifully. Every day I left the class on the verge of tears.... I will be perfectly honest, I hated him and still do. I hate what he did to me and the other girls. (White, 24 year-old female)

I remember this one girl in particular that had started her period. We called her "fast" because we were under the impression that if you were having a period that you were popular with the boys. I don't know about the others, but I was never told that this was just a part of becoming a woman. I can't remember how long it was before my turn came to be called "fast," but I do know that I will never forget when and what happened. (Black, 26 year-old female)

> In school I was good enough that nobody worried about me, but not good enough that anybody noticed me. (White, 28 year-old male)

By acknowledging their own positionality through the writing of life histories, these preservice teachers soon realize that the meanings they give to both schooling and to adolescence are constructed from their own highly contextual (yet ever changing) gendered, raced, and classed perspective. Furthermore, by acknowledging their own self(ves) and subjectivities, they are forced to interrogate their own assumptions about race, class, and gender as exemplified in the following account written by a twenty-one year-old White female:

> Our entire class was in P.E., playing co-ed softball. On this particular day, Barrett and I were experiencing a "lovers quarrel." He was extremely angry with me. I was completely ignoring him, which only heightened his negative feelings toward me. We had a scuffle in the line leading up to home plate because he wanted to be ahead of me. I refused to be ordered around by him and that is when the fighting began. Later on we were in the outfield and a ball was hit toward him. The ball bounced off the top of his head. I thought this incident was hilarious, along with everyone else except Barrett. Needless to say, he was furious. He marched over to me and slapped my face. I went into complete shock! I learned a great deal from the experience. Before the slap I was entirely too bossy with male friends. After the event, I tended to be more cooperative with the opposite sex.

Left unexamined, this story seems to be simply an incident about a boy-girl conflict; however, embedded in the account are powerful assumptions about what constitutes appropriate gendered behavior—that is, girls should learn to hide their feelings, girls should be passive, and girls who insult a boy's ego deserve to be "hit." The "lesson" the author learned when a boy slapped her (*i.e.*, she was too bossy with boys) precipitated a poignant discussion in our class about the special problems adolescent girls have in constructing an appropriate gendered identity amidst the contradictory messages girls receive about what it means to be a woman in today's society.

Bigelow (1992) and Weiler (1992) assert that when schools provide the space for students to bring their out-of-school subjective realities into the classroom, students see themselves as creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients of knowledge. My final exam reflects this belief that knowledge is constructed through the negotiation of personal "inside" knowledge and abstract "outside" knowledge. The exam reads as follows:

> Drawing from our readings and class discussions as well as from your own field experience and your own life history, respond to the following:
> - What ought to be the curriculum at the middle school level?
> - What ought to be the nature of the student-teacher relationship at the middle school level?
> - What ought to be the significance of race, class, and gender in the programs and practices at the middle school level?

In locating this methods course within a discourse that legitimates the personal as a central foundation for exploring understandings about self, students, and schooling, I have tried to "disrupt the discourse of dependency" (Deever, 1995) that all to often occurs between professors (the experts) and students (the empty vessels).

Blurring the Boundaries Between Theory and Practice

My intention in writing this article has not been to suggest that theoretical knowledge is superior to practical knowledge. Rather I have tried to illuminate my own attempt to blur the boundaries between theory and practice in redesigning a particular middle level undergraduate course at a particular university which, like all schools, has its own unique culture, history, and traditions. In reconceptualizing middle level teacher preparation programs, theory and practice should not be treated as binaries, or even opposites. As Deever (1993) suggests, theory and practice are "mutually informing positions, so any discussion of application must be well grounded in self-reflective theoretical discourse or run the risk of wandering onto a landscape of blind practice devoid of substantive purpose and lacking in political clarity" (p. 44). By grounding my teaching practices in a feminist poststructuralist theoretical perspective, I seek to make visible the contradictions, tensions, and inconsistencies that dominate the discourses of adolescence and middle level education, thus making possible both a "language of critique" (Giroux, 1988) and a "language of possibility" (Giroux, 1988) for **fundamentally** reforming middle level education and middle level teacher preparation.

Notes

1. According to the *New World Dictionary* (1968), a nematode is "any of a class of slender, unsegmented, cylindrical worms, including parasitic forms such as the hookworm, pinworm, and trichina; roundworm" (p. 1297).
2. See Cherryholmes, 1988; Malson *et.al.*, 1986; and Weedon, 1987.

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