INTRODUCTION

SCHOOLING THE AMBIGUITIES OF ADOLESCENCE

A Psychocultural Exploration

“All knowledge is ambiguous.” J.S. Habgood

“If I don’t know I don’t know I think I know
If I don’t know I know I think I don’t know.”
(Laing, D.H., 1969, p. 55)

How do we help young people make sense and meaning out of ambiguity and uncertainty during the transition between childhood and adolescence? How do we encourage youth to develop effective skills to help navigate through the culture of ambiguity during early adolescence? Given the increased recent surge in research on social cognition, the focus remains on the cognitive regarding aspects of learning and development (Olson & Dweck, 2009). Thus, this book focuses on theoretical and practical issues regarding emotional and social aspects of adolescents’ educational experiences that may contribute to their emotional and spiritual health. Drawing on past and current research on theory of mind and also on shy/socially withdrawn and emotionally sensitive children and adolescents (Bosacki, 2005; 2008), this book expands on the increasing complexity of the social and personal worlds of the Canadian adolescent. In particular, this book focuses on the ambiguities regarding identity and relationships that occur during the transitional developmental period between childhood and adolescence.

As educators become increasingly cognizant of the new realities of adolescents, this book aims to encourage educators to redefine and restructure their definitions of ambiguity within adolescence. In particular, this book will build on, and then move beyond the traditional cognitive-developmental representations of how adolescents learn, and provide recommendations that may inspire educators to adapt holistic and inclusive educational strategies that aim to help youth to develop healthy relationships with one another and themselves in the increasingly ambiguous contexts of the classroom, community and beyond. Overall, this book aims to encourage the expansion of new ideas that challenge the dominant discourse in educational psychology that tends to focus on the cognitive. This book encourages readers to focus on the importance of emotionality and spirituality regarding teaching and learning within the realms of the personal, social, and supernatural. Specifically, I will explore why is emotional and spiritual health important for adolescents in the classroom, what are these important educational health issues, and how can educators and researchers integrate the emotional and spiritual into the classroom and develop practical educational strategies that will enable adolescents to navigate the ambiguous landscape of the classroom.
INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the fields of human development and education. I view the psychocultural notion of that development and learning includes aspects of cognitive, social, cultural, emotional, moral, and the spiritual through the lens of both an educational researcher and a practitioner or a developmental interventionist. Through the book, I will draw on empirical evidence from past and present research on adolescents’ social and emotional worlds including psychological understanding, self-conceptions, and peer relations, and also practical educational implications. This book will combine the scholarly areas of theory, research, and practice. As a developmental interventionist, it is my goal to provide a book that will encourage educators and researchers to engage the two disciplines in an ongoing critical discourse.

This book investigates adolescents’ ability to interpret, understand or make meaning of human thoughts and feelings, and its relation to their sense of self, peer relations, and socio-communicative competence within the school setting. Often referred to as Theory of Mind understanding (ToM), the ability to “read” others’ minds or mental states in the context of social action can also be referred to as psychological understanding (Bruner, 1996). This ability to translate the social language exchanged between others helps us to make sense of the minds of others in that it helps us to understand multiple perspectives and to communicate with others (Nelson, 2007; Tomasello, 1999).

Within the larger context of folk psychology, or our culturally shaped notion in terms of which people organize their views of themselves, or others, and of the world in which they live. This folk psychology, according to Bruner (1990) is an essential base not only of personal meaning, but of cultural cohesion as well. This book builds on Bruner’s (1996) description of the connection between folk psychology and folk pedagogy as folk psychology guides our social interactions, whereas folk pedagogy in part shapes our goals to help children and adolescents to learn about the world. As educators and researchers, how can folk psychology and pedagogy help us to explore our questions regarding what are adolescents’ minds like and how can we help them learn within the culture of ambiguity in the current school context?

Past research makes clear that communication, understanding of mind and relationships are closely linked in normative development, especially when individual differences are considered. A wealth of research with young children has now shown that engaging in discourse about inner states is linked to later success in understanding of mind and emotion. Beyond the age of five, however, little is known about the links between the understanding other minds and relationships (Dunn, 2008; Hughes, 2011; Moore, 2006). The ability to solve such ambiguous puzzles may mark children’s first realization that beliefs can have their origin within persons rather than exclusively in an external world. Given that children who possess high levels of psychological understanding are more likely to “think about their own and others’ thinking” during the school day, such an ability has important educational implications for beyond the grade school into high school (Wellman & Laguttata, 2004).

Research has shown that the ability to “read others” or to make sense of the signs and symbols evident in human communication has an influence on children’s