

# cooperative approaches



# 24 spring 2025



## Adolescent Mental Health

In partnership with UCPA  
and Scouts et Guides de France

Photo UCPA. Vincent Colin

« The only path offering humanity hope for a better future is one of cooperation and partnership »

Kofi Annan



• *Photo UCPA Port Camargue. Vincent Colin*

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# ADOLESCENT LEARNING LOSS AND COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES IN THE US AND FRANCE

BY LARRY CHILDS

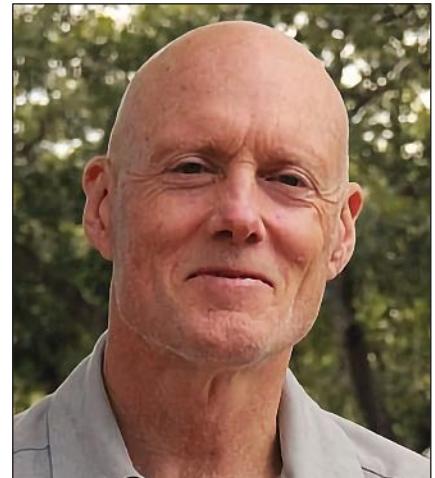
**T**his English edition explores many features of contemporary adolescents' life experiences with a primary focus on France, though many articles draw from theories and perspectives of psychologists and youth development experts from other countries, notably the US and England.

Further framing this edition are my own analyses on parallels and differences between the experience of adolescents in France versus the US. I draw on my training and consulting in youth development within hundreds of schools and youth services organizations. My work has focused on positive youth development through group process, leadership and school culture. Geographically my experience spans 24 US states and several countries including one national initiative in France. I have also been a parent of now grown adolescent boys. What follows are summaries of my top 7 French/American distinctions in prominent social factors and teaching strategies influencing adolescent development. The emphasis is on the American context which I know best, but for each there is French comparison.

My intention for this analysis with featured contrast between our two nations is to offer readers a unique lens around which to consider the wide array of articles comprising this edition.

## **SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

On the rise in public schools - As documented in this issue of AC, French adolescents have only recently started to be provided with consistent instruction in 'psycho-social' skills at school. This is reportedly due in part to growing recognition that gaps in this area can be attributed to social skill deficiencies among some adults thereby impacting workplace efficacy. Meanwhile it has been more than 20 years since evidence-based 'social emotional learning' (SEL) standards, often accompanied by state or district level endorsed curricula, have been embraced and implemented in schools across the US. The links between effective SEL intracademic performance and success in life are well researched. This is also intuitively obvious to most and informs a





## DEI, IDENTITY AND GENDER FLUIDITY

Confusing culture and politics - In the US adolescents have fallen prey to culture wars where schools are an epicenter. While the political left centers the human condition around identity and concepts such as choice and fluidity in gender, race as a leading criteria for determining 'community', and embrace of critical theory which applies a binary social determinant; one whereby individuals experience social power or oppression depending on their affiliation. For instance: a white heterosexual male has power and privilege over a black LGBTQ+ female. Those on the political right generally reject this premise all together and under the new federal administration are fighting to dismantle any supporting policies and even ban aligned practices in schools. In the US the conflicting positions are widespread and tend to divide and negatively impact school culture and with it adolescent development, and even entire communities.. These identity distinctions and political tensions, while also present in France, are far less pronounced. While the liberal/conservative divide is also active in France, it centers far less on youth or teaching and learning policies in schools.

## SCREEN TIME AND COGNITIVE DECLINE

Countering much of the impressive progress in the US with SEL research and instructional practices is the impact of technology and screens as adolescents in particular experience increasing social isolation and angst. This arises through the frequently distorted, cryptic and often abusive qualities of many on-line forums from video platforms to group chat and direct messaging. In the US recent bans on phone access while at school are becoming increasingly popular and considerable research demonstrates their efficacy. Often students report a sense of relief in that they don;t need to worry about their pesky phone

complementary social/academic approach to learning that appears to be more advanced in the US than in France.

## BULLYING CULTURE

On the decline? - For decades bullying was at epidemic levels across the US. While differences by state or municipality may have been common, bullying was nonetheless widespread and had negatively impacted the mental health of adolescents and their educational outcomes. Some attempted to tackle it with deterrents such as strongly worded policies and punitive enforcement, while others erred towards prevention through curriculum and teaching practices. What has proven effective is a combination. Explicit attention to policies and locally adapted rules along with ramped up attention to school culture and targeted social emotional learning strategies. Efforts have paid off and contributed to the status quo whereby bullying in the US today is considerably diminished relative to 10, 20 or 30 years ago. The strong correlation with the rise of SEL programming indicates that the French may also see bullying diminish with their increasing attention to the psycho-social.

**FOR DECADES, BULLYING WAS AT EPIDEMIC LEVELS ACROSS THE US... EFFORTS HAVE PAID OFF... BULLYING IN THE US TODAY IS CONSIDERABLY DIMINISHED...**

incessantly alerting them to non urgent and distracting or abusive content. Striking a balance between encouraging student self-management with the practical reality that screen addiction requires adults to set strong boundaries. Despite these policy advances the impact of screens in the US and France seem equally pernicious.

### COVID LEARNING LOSS

A universal set back - The forced isolation and obligation to on-line learning resulting from COVID, while advantageous for a small group of students with certain learning challenges, caused a huge set-back for the vast majority of students even at the universities. Educators talk about the need to help students catch up, but even a few years post-COVID since students returned to classrooms, the social and academic levels have yet to return to pre-COVID achievement levels. Today many question whether the CDC advised safety precautions were worth the negative longer term impacts to learning, well-being and workforce productivity. The losses due to COVID are especially tragic given the many other supportive advances in adolescent development research and practice. It seems these setbacks were experienced as equally devastating in France as in the US, though in the US conservative states were less rigid than liberal states and thereby less impacted.

### GUN VIOLENCE

A long-standing public health epidemic - In the US gun violence has torn apart schools and communities with on-going fear and trauma deeply interfering with adolescent development. While mass shootings in schools capture the headlines, even a single adolescent gun death outside school impacts an entire community. Aside from failed states the US tragically leads the world in this area thereby compromising its other adolescent supporting advantages.

### CARING ADULT/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN SCHOOLS

Caring adult/student relationship in schools: A key to engaged learning - A large body of research demonstrates how a single caring adult relationship can, for an adolescent, make a sea change of difference in school learning and their well-being. In the US this research has been embraced almost universally even across political divides and income disparities. I attribute the significant attention to this single factor as a powerful counter force to the many other negative risk factors. France by contrast appears to have not prioritized the student teacher relationship and adolescents continue to suffer as a consequence. On a positive note this low cost culture shift could present a significant opportunity for the French.

As these comparisons are not based on rigorous research my analysis is up for debate. I welcome reader commentary and hope you enjoy digging into this important edition on the adolescent experience.

### FRANCE BY CONTRAST APPEARS TO HAVE NOT PRIORITIZED THE STUDENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

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Criteria	France Comparative advantage	United States Comparative advantage
Social emotional learning: On the rise in public schools	-	+
Bullying culture: On the decline?	-	+
DEI, identity and gender fluidity: Confusing culture and politics	+	-
Screen time and cognitive decline	=	=
COVID learning loss: A universal set back	=	=
Gun violence: A long-standing public health epidemic	+	-
Caring adult/student relationship in schools: A key to engaged learning	-	+

This chart assesses 7 variables impacting adolescent health in both the US and France, and suggests which country has an advantage over (+) or disadvantage to (-) the other relative to the criteria listed. Note that in 2 instances the countries seem equally impacted. This assessment is based on limited research and intended to spark discussion more so than suggest that the comparisons are conclusive. Please read the full editorial for further context.





# A LOOK AT TEENAGERS

**INTERVIEW WITH DOCTOR MARION ROBIN, CHILD PSYCHIATRIST**

**BY ROLAND DAVAL**

*Please introduce yourself for our readers:*

I'm an adolescent psychiatrist and deputy head of the adolescent psychiatry department at the Institut Mutualiste Montsouris in Paris. In this department, I work with young people, particularly those hospitalized in crisis, but also in consultations. Other areas of expertise include neuroscience research where I am working on emotional regulation in relation to patients' histories and the adversities they've encountered. I attempt to unravel trauma in difficult life situations. I also work in prevention focused on developing more preventive health care programming. Adolescence is a fairly difficult period of life, a time of transition and one that presents many risks to mental health.

***Based on your experience, what are the most significant difficulties faced by teenagers; those which pose greatest risks to their health?***

The last 30 years have been a period when society has become much more aware of the needs and difficulties of the teenage years and specifically in

terms of their integrating into the adult world. We have become more aware of this evolving issue of autonomy-dependence, since the need to become autonomous from parents and family leads to encounters with people outside the family, and this can lead to stress when feelings of insecurity arise. This stress can then lead to difficulties when meeting people outside the family, if solid foundations have not been established within the family or within the individual personality itself.

There has been a growing awareness that the bodily changes linked to puberty are a source of the unknown, a source of the quest for knowledge, but also of discomfort, sometimes a feeling of powerlessness at not knowing how to manage one's body and its changes. I think that today, society is quite clear about the fact that these changes cause developmental difficulties, which is why the notion of an adolescent crisis has become quite popular. But it also seems to me that we've reached the limits of this period, since, after some thirty years of awareness-raising about the specific



Dr Marion Robin

**WHAT GENERATES DIFFICULTIES IS THE MISMATCH BETWEEN THE FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS SPECIFIC TO THIS AGE: TO BE INTEGRATED, TO BE ABLE TO INTEGRATE, TO FIND A JOB, ETC., AND SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO THESE FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS.**

needs of adolescents, adults anticipate that adolescence will in any case be experienced as a crisis.

Today, we need to relativize this link between the notion of adolescence and the notion of crisis insofar as, if we analyze the difficulties of adolescents in psychiatric care, we realize that there is a whole set of fundamental needs that their immediate or wider environment has still not been able to meet well enough.

For my part, what interests me today is conducting analysis on several levels, not only at the individual or family level, but the societal as well. The difficulties associated with adolescence, which can become a crisis, also need to be analyzed in terms of the fundamental needs that are not being met by society, and which would thus favor and support them in this particular period of development.

*Can we also say that there are two periods of difficulty? The first is that of puberty, with bodily changes, access to sexuality, etc., and the second is in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, with very difficult passages in the modern world, more difficult perhaps than in the past, such as access to employment with all the anxiety that entails; and access to love, to married life, etc., like the conquest of autonomy in relation to parents. Do all these factors also generate major difficulties?*

It's not this stage of development as such that generates difficulties, but the mismatch between the fundamental needs specific to this age: to be integrated, to be able to integrate, to find a job, etc., and society's response to these fundamental needs.

In the case of bodily changes, for example, the fact that they are represented by a collective of adults in a transgenerational way, and are the object of ceremonies, as can be found in certain more traditional societies, makes it possible to frame this period with collective representations, whereas the difficulties begin when the adolescent is in cultural context

where they have to manage these stages of development on their own. This is why I question the idea that adolescence is a crisis in itself, as it generally only becomes critical when needs are not met by the surrounding society.

**Surveys have shown a higher frequency of suicidal thoughts and emergency room visits since the COVID crisis. What happened to exacerbate the difficulties at that time?**

Between 2019 and 2022, there was a 40% increase in suicide attempts among teenagers, among young girls alone. Boys also attempt suicide, but we didn't see the same increase. While this increase was made very visible by the pandemic, in reality it followed an increase, albeit less marked, that had been gradually evolving, year on year, since 2010. At the hospital, we were able to observe that the profiles of young people and their suicide attempts were also changing over time, and were already worsening before the pandemic, with more and more frequent, more and more severe acts, with recourse to medication or other more lethal risk-taking gestures, year after year.

If we want to analyze the factors involved, we start by looking at the teenager's daily environment. We have observed that the teenager may have had relationship difficulties, such as a romantic break-up or a problem at school, an immediate problem that may be the last straw that breaks the camel's back.

Generally speaking, however, we find that in order to analyze the psychiatric crisis the teenager is going through, we need to find an average of five to ten causes in order to have a sufficiently accurate idea of the context and be able to act on it effectively. We'll be looking for individual factors, which we'll work on in the treatment, as well as family factors, which we'll share with the young people and their family history. We'll look for transgenerational knots, the difficulties experienced by the

family at the time: financial, professional, which will weaken the container around the teenager.

But the changes we've seen year after year suggest that it's not just what's going on within the family that's at play, but that there are also external factors which mean that families no longer feel capable of managing their child's situation once they've been discharged from hospital, a situation we didn't observe fifteen years ago. This growing feeling of powerlessness among families is linked to the decline in societal restraint in general, and in societal restraint around families, that capacity to be, for a society, a support, a recourse, a support to provide them with resources.

These factors became even more visible after the pandemic, but we could already analyze them beforehand. For example, in 2010/2015, when young people were discharged from hospital and family situations were still tense, we relied on grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc. But families have dispersed geographically and today there is much less intra-family support capacity in the broader sense. As a result, we've become more isolated; we've turned inward on the nuclear family, and even when it's not separated, the burden is even heavier for a single parent.

The saying " *It takes a village to raise a child* " is fully borne out by today's science.

This family support, in the broadest sense of the term, has therefore diminished, but it has also diminished in proportion to the support provided by the wider social fabric. The world of associations, local communities and neighborhoods, which provide families and teenagers with day-to-day support, has been diluted, as has the rest of the social fabric. This is a major loss of resources for families and young people.

***But is it also the fact that today, with new modes of communication, when you're on your cell phone, for example, you have far fewer direct***



***contacts in a way, even if you think you have a large network of contacts and human relationships? Face-to-face, close relationships have become diluted. What do you think?***

By analyzing over 400 families to see what dynamics were at play in the difficulties of young people experiencing acute psychiatric episodes leading to hospitalization, the study showed that three dimensions were particularly affected by the situation:

The dimension of containment within the family, which is hampered.

The dimension of affiliation, i.e. belonging to the family group, closeness, quality and warmth of ties.

The individuation dimension, i.e. the autonomy and empowerment of adolescents, which, in certain problem situations, exists only to a limited extent.

In relation to the question posed, this essentially concerns the issue of affiliation. In the wake of this study, I was able to re-analyze these three dimensions as being indicative of three fundamental needs that concern young people, and which both family and society can meet. If society

**THE PRINCIPLE OF THE TRUSTED ADULT, WHEN REALLY DEVELOPED - AS IS THE CASE IN QUEBEC, FOR EXAMPLE - SEEMS TO ME TO BE A REALLY IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE.**

doesn't meet these needs, the family all the more needs to develop resources to do so. If the family fails to meet these needs, the individual must compensate with a large number of affiliations and the development of individuation.

Social networks or the Internet screen, when you can't communicate with anyone close by, still offer an affiliative link that enables you to survive and discuss what you're going through with others, and that's still better than nothing.

But when a young person stays tucked away in his room in front of a screen, chatting with friends, rather than being in the neighborhood, at the teen club or on the sports field, it's a loss of affiliative opportunity, since it's a bond that isn't corporeal, that isn't embodied; it's a bond that is two-dimensional and therefore only very partially fulfills the function of affiliation between two individuals.

Work carried out on the question of young people's resilience, their ability to withstand shocks and difficulties, reveals three important elements:

- Having adult support.
- A relationship of trust, with the adult expressing high expectations of the young people.
- The opportunity to be socially useful, i.e. to be of service to others in one's environment.

These dimensions are well reflected in everything that popular education associations can offer young people (NOTE: These points are discussed in detail in the article in this issue on resilience)

***Do you think that these elements can help young people to better resist the difficulties they encounter, and thereby help provide for a certain level of mental health?***

The principle of the trusted adult, when really developed - as is the case in Quebec, for example - seems to me to be a really important principle. The

trusted adult is not necessarily a member of the family.

For teenagers, in the event of difficulties, it's absolutely essential that they can rely on someone to help them deal with all kinds of situations. It's a matter of survival in adolescence.

On the question of expectations, the fact that adults express expectations of young people means that they are demonstrating their potential for investment and their confidence in their future, their ability to envisage a future that is currently severely hampered and altered. But these expectations must be clearly defined and proportionate to their abilities. Professionally, I meet a lot of young people who suffer from the fact that expectations are too high in relation to what they are capable of doing, especially in privileged socio-cultural circles, at high educational levels.

***Do you think it's important to be able to be of service, to be socially useful?***

This ties in with the question of individuation expressed earlier, i.e. having responsibility, autonomy, self-fulfilment and giving meaning to what you do.

All these expressions of mission which give teenagers a sense of responsibility before they turn 18 are important and useful, and there's a lack of them today. Sometimes, the first time young people are responsible, apart from putting a ballot paper in a ballot box, is the day they get their first job, or have a child, which makes them plunge from nothing to everything, in an absolutely ungraduated way, causing unnecessary distress.

***Is society's view of people with psychological difficulties or mental disorders, and their stigmatization, also an important issue? What can be done to combat this stigmatization and ensure that mental health problems are accepted just as other health problems?***

For their part, young people are rather exemplary on this issue because they feel more at ease and stigmatize each

other much less than adults. They are much more accepting of the diversity that they themselves claim. This right to diversity for instance reduces the stigmatization of mental disorders within their own generation. The question is how we, as adults, can integrate this approach into our thinking. I think that community support, the social fabric, plays a big part, in other words, the fact that we can be part of collective action reduces identity issues. There's a real shift between identity and action, since we're engaged together. I really believe in the importance of collective commitment, with gradually increasing responsibility for young people and intergenerationally.

The movements that have developed over the last ten years around the issue of climate and the environment are often very intergenerational, bringing together people from different backgrounds, involving young people and promoting social cohesion. That's the whole point of acting together.

I still quote Canada where this is the case, but if young people could have the opportunity to do internships more regularly, if they had at least 15 days of internships every year beginning in 3rd grade, with even minimal responsibilities in institutions, companies, associations, they could be confronted much earlier with the question of disability and therefore consider it as something normal since it's part of the society in which they get involved.

I think it's the unknown that encourages stigmatization, so we might as well start early providing opportunities to be useful in areas where there's a need, as well as a corresponding need for what young people can offer.

***In producing this issue of the journal, we have discovered that many organizations, such as "Mental Health Ambassadors" and mental health first aid training courses, promote the possibility of being listened to, of asking questions of a peer. What is your analysis of all these initiatives?***



***Should they be encouraged? Is there a risk that people who don't have sufficient skills will still feel competent and invested?***

A lot of young people are actually involved in these associative initiatives, and it's great that they're mobilized in response to a need that exists and is very real, with the increase in distress and the decline in the mental health of teenagers and young adults. I'm thinking of the Nighthline helpline, which is a really good thing.

But at the same time, it's a worrying situation, because it's sad that they had to do it because it wasn't previously handled by other adults. It shows a lack of responsiveness on the part of our society - adults, professionals and politicians, and that's regrettable.

We lose credibility with young people, and it reinforces their feeling that they need to and can perhaps handle things better on their own. It's true that decisions relating to the environment concern them first and foremost, but they also concern us all to a very great extent. This creates worrying inter-generational gaps which, even if they are only slightly conflicted, can lead to

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**IN TERMS OF CONTAINMENT, FOR EXAMPLE, WE NEED TO PROTECT YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ACCESS TO PORNOGRAPHY, TO WHICH THEY ARE EXPOSED FROM THE AGE OF 10-12; STATISTICS SHOW THAT MORE THAN HALF OF BOYS HAVE ALREADY SEEN PORNOGRAPHIC FILMS BY THE AGE OF 12. THIS IS A HEALTH SCANDAL IN ITSELF.**

a feeling that “we'll manage on our own”, even if they actually don't yet have the resources or skills to do so. We'll manage on our own, since the adults aren't there. But they're right to do it, because someone has to, and most of the time they do it pretty well. As you said, one of the main building blocks of resilience is the presence of others. The mobilization of peers is a fundamental support that is extremely useful for their health.

The challenge is to coordinate what institutions do. At Montsouris, for example, we are working with the “Facettes” festival to organize a scientific program based on citizens' initiatives, helping them to mobilize experts in various fields. The festival's initiatives, activities and events start with users and citizens, with the professionals present adding content through their contributions.

*The government has decided to make mental health a major national cause. At the same time, many people say that there is a certain poverty or inadequacy of the institutions that guarantee mental health in our country. What do you think is the most important thing to do?*

In 2022, a colleague and I wrote an article in Le Monde drawing attention to the deterioration in young people's mental health and the need for everyone to be aware of it, because we can't expect medicine alone to resolve this issue, since it's a real societal problem.

I think that if we become aware of what's going wrong, of the ingredients that lead to the deterioration of young people's mental health, and if we treat them on a societal level, we'll already have won an important cause, and we'll be able to activate the necessary levers, with medicine of course having to activate its own.

Today, we all know that medicine, and psychiatry and child psychiatry in particular, have fallen into disrepair over the last twenty years, for the same reasons as the deterioration in young people's health. Care - for children in crèches, for the elderly in nursing homes - is in short supply; this diagnosis is that of the crushing of the bond, the insufficient value of the bond and the value of caring for others. The results on the mental health of young people and people in vulnerable situations are there for all to see, and we need to be aware of this link.

After the pandemic, people are now more capable of hearing and understanding the mental health situation. When, for example, I meet journalists and they ask me “In your opinion, why are young people doing so badly?”, I put the question back to them and, in general, they refer to the main factors: the state of geopolitics, the state of the planet, social networks, pressure at school, sexual violence, etc., and I confirm that they have the answers to their question. But now we have to think about how to act, and the main levers are contentment, affiliation and individuation.

In terms of containment, for example, we need to protect young people from access to pornography, to which they are exposed from the age of 10-12; statistics show that more than half of boys have already seen pornographic films by the age of 12. This is a health scandal in itself.

Sexual violence is on the rise, with young people being abused with impunity on social networks. There aren't enough legal limits to protect them from the dangers to which young people are exposed on social networks and the Internet. It's unthinkable that minors who have accounts on social networks can be approached by adults who send

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them private messages. It's unthinkable that young people should be able to access pornographic sites simply by declaring themselves adults or minors. We need to legislate and set limits.

In terms of affiliation, we need to act in the direction of getting together, of living together, so that young people don't feel alone in their own homes, and so that they make friends in their immediate environment.

Of course, screens make it possible to keep in touch with distant friends, but we need to develop teen clubs in neighborhoods so that young people can go there, and sports grounds where girls can also go, because since girls do less sport than boys, they are more nervous and have more anxiety-depressive disorders. These spaces need to be secured with street workers and educators, although many of them have been withdrawn over the years. By re-establishing an affiliation in the neighborhood, we're going to strengthen the resources of the family, which will feel less alone.

In terms of individuation, it's particularly important to be able to give children and young people increasing responsibility for transmission, and to offer them activities with responsibilities.

Young people have a great deal of expertise when it comes to taking preventive action with other young people. They are often in the best position to talk about the difficulties they face. In the field of health prevention, for example, we know that in HIV prevention campaigns, young people have been the most effective in finding messages to send to others.

Yet they are never involved in HIV prevention or sexual health campaigns, even though they are at the forefront in terms of consequences, and undoubtedly



the best people to think about these prevention policies.

Last year, for example, we asked medical students to take part in prevention initiatives involving screens. They made some absolutely brilliant videos to illustrate just how, when you're on the phone with a partner, family or friends, you lose touch with the person just a metre away. These videos are very funny and very effective, and they should be broadcast nationally and internationally.

We need to give young people the means to say what they want to say, to do what they want to do, to lift the barriers and open up new avenues in this area, avenues which I believe are important for mental health.

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A STUDY

# INCREASING CONFIDENCE IN YOUNG PEOPLE

## THE IMPACTS OF COOPERATION IN GROUPS, ADULT SUPPORT AND SOCIAL USEFULNESS

INTERVIEW WITH STEFAN LIPANSKY, PROJECT MANAGER FOR THE ASSOCIATION “VERS LE HAUT”

**V**ers Le Haut is a recognized non profit scientific organization of public interest in France. Launched in 2015 its ambition is fueling public debate, informing decision-makers, and engaging education stakeholders on matters impacting the mental health of young people. It is also a think tank registered by the European Observatory of Think Tanks.

Vers Le Haut is non-partisan and involves those working with young people and families engaging experts, and civil society figures in its discussions, while grounding its work on scientific studies and research. Vers Le Haut advances concrete proposals for developing projects tailored to the challenges of our time.

*Hello Mr. Lipiansky, thank you for agreeing to this interview. As project manager for Educational Alliances at Vers le Haut, you recently conducted a study published under the title “A serious need for trust. What we owe our youth,” which caught our attention for this issue of Cooperative*

*Approaches devoted to adolescent mental health. First, please introduce yourself to our readers.*

Previously I was a teacher and associate professor of economics and management and began teaching at the university as a doctoral student. I then took a leave of absence to take on responsibilities in the nonprofit sector while continuing to teach independently while also leading an organization in the field of music for about 15 years. Then I resumed my studies in philosophy for three years specializing in education with the intent to further my thinking on public policy in education, which led me to join Vers le Haut, that celebrated its 10th anniversary this year!

When Vers le Haut was created, there was dissatisfaction with the way educational issues were handled in the public sphere. In particular, too much focus was placed on the school system alone, making invisible not only the role of the family, but also popular education, early childhood, the plight of the most vulnerable children, and so on. Following this



Stefan Lipiansky



**WHEN ASKED 6 OF 10 YOUTH INDICATED THEY WOULD LIKE OPPORTUNITIES TO BE ENGAGED IN PROJECTS MAKING A CONCRETE IMPACT, AND IN PARTICULAR IN PROJECTS WITH A COLLECTIVE DIMENSION.**

initial observation, Vers le Haut decided its mission would be to focus on revitalizing public debate by shedding a much broader light on educational issues and drawing heavily on the experience of those working in the field. First and foremost, the founding partners of Vers le Haut give a lot of space to civil society players involved in education on a daily basis. These include the fields of training, tutoring, remedial learning, vocational training for young people and also health professionals, social action, etc.

***What are Vers le Haut's main activities?***

Vers le Haut has a busy publishing initiative. Twice a year, we publish a major study that deals with cross-cutting issues, such as the one that led me to speak at the event organized by UCPA and Scouts de France on teenagers' mental health and which focused on trust among young people. We're currently wrapping up a major study on the links between the world of work and the world of education, and we're starting another focusing on educational issues affecting the family.

So, twice a year, a major study and then more regular publications, as we go along, via our website and social networks, such as our newsletter. This

involves deciphering all the studies and reports coming out in the field of education. We also go out into the field to report on what associations are doing, and what's happening in schools. We endeavor to lend a 'pride of place' to the testimonies of education professionals and young people themselves, notably through a podcast that we host. We invite them to talk about their experiences in relation to the themes we cover. For example, when we worked on the links between the world of work and the world of education, we invited a journeyman to talk about his experience, and interviewed young people about their experiences as jobseekers, trainees, and so on. Within all our publications there are always these three aspects: analyses, initiatives and testimonials.

Our most visible activity is therefore editorial, but we also have a less visible role in leading a network of education players by involving them in our work. For each study, we rely on a steering committee made up of some of our partners. For example, the Scouts et Guides de France took part in our work on young people's confidence which would at times engage directly at conferences and workshops. We also sit on boards of directors or expert committees on educational issues.

***How did you approach the question of young people's confidence, and what findings did you draw from this study?***

The principle behind our studies is to adopt the broadest possible perspective taking into account the diversity of interactions on the subject. So we approached the question of confidence from three angles: self-confidence, confidence in others and, finally, confidence in the future. These three dimensions are interconnected and mutually illuminating.

***How do you relate the issue of confidence to that of mental health?***

Our starting point was the observation that adolescence and young adulthood is a time of vulnerability. It's a reality that can't be avoided, so we

have to ask ourselves what makes it possible to get through this difficult period and overcome these vulnerabilities without falling into symptoms of great suffering. What is it about the educational system experienced by young people that can help them get through this period without damage? What positive role can educators play?

To answer these questions, we drew on the findings from various studies, not just our own, highlighting the existence of stress and various anxiety factors within schools. One example is the grading system, which is a daily source of stress for students, since it is based on identifying faults and errors rather than evaluating success. Educational settings are also places where a sizeable minority of pupils are subjected to physical and psychological violence, but the aspect that seemed most interesting to us to highlight, and which in some way characterizes the French system, is that French pupils express, over the course of their studies, the fact that they feel insufficiently listened to and supported by their teachers.

The deterioration in student well-being often occurs between the start of sixth form and the end of collège. Studies carried out by the French Ministry of Education show that the primary cause of this deterioration is a lack of rapport with adults and teachers. According to UNICEF consultations with children, on average only one pupil in two is able to find an adult in the school to whom he or she can confide in the event of problems. This is also clear from OECD studies such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), where France ranks second to last among OECD countries in terms of the degree to which teachers listen and empathize. We can see, then, that young people's experience in educational institutions is not always conducive to nurturing their self-confidence, trust in others or their confidence in the future; this is obviously not without consequences for their well-being and mental health.

***Have you identified other causes, not directly linked to the school environment, that explain the deterioration in teenagers' well-being?***

Next, we wanted to explore something a little more specific, which is often in the news: the impact of environmental issues on young people. Every year, in partnership with a polling institute, we question young people on recurring elements as well as on specific ones, and last year we asked them about their perception of environmental challenges. A large majority of them - 71% - feel that environmental issues have an impact on their morale and well-being, giving rise to feelings of sadness and fear.

***Has your study identified any solutions that could help restore teenagers' confidence?***

Yes, to complete the survey, we also wanted to explore solutions. So we asked young people how they would like to be armed to face the challenges affecting their morale and well-being. The majority - 6 out of 10 - answered that they would like to be offered opportunities to engage in projects with a concrete impact on the environment, and in particular projects with a collective dimension. In fact, what can boost young people's self-confidence, their ability to cope with





**IT WAS ALSO THE FIRST TIME THEY HAD FELT THAT ADULTS WERE THERE TO SUPPORT, GUIDE AND ORIENT THEM**

adversity and respond well to periods of vulnerability is the possibility of becoming more active players in the face of challenging events and issues they encounter.

Young people who only go to school, who are not involved in popular education-type extracurricular activities, who have rarely experienced cooperative action, sometimes find themselves passive and lonely. The majority of adults are not identified as supportive or listening figures, but rather as authorities who are there to say, "it's okay or it's not okay". This picture is, of course, a bit of a caricature, as there are also some remarkable initiatives with our schools, but these exceptions do not reflect the experience of most young people.

To summarize, conditions today aren't particularly conducive to developing self-confidence due to lacking much experience with social usefulness, insufficient power to act on their own, and skills to overcome difficulties. Nor do they have the opportunity to experience how they can cooperate with and rely on others to overcome the difficulties they encounter.

*So you're confirming the findings of research that has identified three main protective factors that young people need to find in their environment for developing their resilience, i.e. their ability to bounce back from setbacks or difficulties: 1) attentive, caring relationships including with adults, 2) messages of high expectations and, 3), opportunities for group participation and meaningful contribution.*

Yes, numerous research studies have shown that being placed in successful, cooperative situations and being able to experience a sense of social usefulness are protective factors in terms of mental health.

This is something that emerges from the testimony of young people themselves when they are involved in experiences of this kind. As part of this study, we ran a workshop with young people in Lyon associated with Année Lumière, which organizes a gap-year orientation for students either after the baccalauréat, or during their higher education.

This is especially effective for those feeling a little lost in their career path and don't really know what they want to do, or have been through some rather difficult experiences and would like to bounce back. Année Lumière offers them workshops focused on self-discovery and the discovery of others, and helps them make commitments through volunteer work, internships or civic service. Towards the end of the year, we met with a group of these young people to find out what they had gained from their experience. Aged 16 to 25, they had already experienced a great deal, but many told us that this was the first year they had really experienced collective action, the fact of living experiences together, sharing them and comparing them. It was also the first time they had felt that adults were there to support, guide and orient them, and that they had had their first experience of commitment and social usefulness. They described the experience as a real turning point: "I'd

never before discovered what I could be good at and what I could do for others...". Many of them had previously experienced suffering, which they overcame thanks to the triple experience of cooperation, adult support and social usefulness.

In the daily lives of young people today, there's something that really takes an enormous amount of space, and that's the time spent on social networks. Have you identified the influence they can have on young people's well-being and equilibrium?

We haven't carried out any studies on this subject ourselves, but I have analyzed what the scientific literature says on the subject. The conclusions of the various studies are not always concordant, but there's no doubt that social networking affects self-image. Unfortunately, this is particularly true of young people. Overexposure to social networks, particularly in the case of younger teenage girls, risks creating a degraded self-image and generating anxiety, sadness and feelings of malaise (see box). On other aspects of social networks, there are relatively contradictory results. What seems to emerge is that there are thresholds in terms of the amount of time people spend on line. Moderate use seems to have positive effects in maintaining sociability, but beyond a certain threshold it has negative effects.

***You mentioned French students' lack of self-confidence. What features of the French education system are responsible for this impact?***

I've already mentioned some of the causes, i.e., the lack of adult support. Then there's the fact that France is lagging behind in the implementation of cooperative pedagogies, which enable young people to cooperate with others and feel a resulting sense of self-esteem and collective usefulness.

Some researchers in the educational sciences are very focused on these approaches. So I went to see what could be done that wasn't being implemented. For example, small



teaching modules such as 'the knowledge market', a workshop where each pupil runs a small stand and teaches the others something they know how to do. The idea is to bring peer-to-peer knowledge transfer up to date. Identifying one's own skills, talents and abilities that can be useful to others, and seeing that others are motivated to acquire them, fosters the development of self-confidence and motivation to learn. Unfortunately, these approaches are rarely or only marginally employed in the French education system. Horizontal teaching between students is still relatively little used, despite the fact that, in the final analysis, it is just as favorable to the receiver as to the provider.

In French education, academic skills are most highly valued, but practical or psychosocial skills are less visible and little exploited. Yet they are essential for learning how to learn, and for developing self-esteem and self-confidence. For example, in our barometer, young people highlighted the difficulty they have in speaking in public as symptomatic of their lack of self-confidence. It's a weakness of the French system to focus so much on the

**IN FRENCH EDUCATION, ACADEMIC SKILLS ARE MOST HIGHLY VALUED, BUT PRACTICAL OR PSYCHOSOCIAL SKILLS ARE LESS VISIBLE AND LITTLE EXPLOITED.**



## **SOME TEACHERS EXPRESSED DISSATISFACTION WITH THE TEACHING METHODS THEY HAD BEEN OFFERED DURING TRAINING**

written word to the detriment of the spoken word. Older young people say the fact of having difficulty speaking in public penalizes them greatly in their professional careers.

We interviewed a number of associations active in this field, notably Eloquentia and Trouve ta Voix. I discovered that taking the floor means not only having the opportunity to give one's opinion, but also learning to express oneself in an informed and articulate way on subjects that are close to one's heart. Too often, young people are invited to express themselves on subjects they haven't chosen. And what emerges from these speaking workshops is that there are truly privileged moments for building self-confidence by overcoming the fear of expressing one's opinion and being sincere and authentic in front of others. We're in a vulnerable situation, and it's a time when we can work on both self-confidence and confidence in the group and in others. From the testimonials I've gathered, I see an illustration of a teaching method that is conducive to development of confidence, and which has been largely under-exploited in the educational pathways.

***We've talked about what young people have to say, but in your surveys you've also heard from teachers... What do they have to say?***

We have interviewed some teachers, but not in scientific terms. Our annual survey is based on a panel of young people and parents. In our study, we looked for testimonials to illustrate how working with young people from elementary school onwards can develop confidence. One teacher told us how she went about identifying and highlighting students' strengths, resources and successes. Some teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the teaching methods they had been offered during training. They are looking for other methods, particularly in the new education field. I'm thinking, for example, of a math teacher profiled in a recent publication, who spends a lot of time at the beginning of the year working on class rules, making group agreements to find out what students need to feel comfortable. She also offers yoga and physical conditioning sessions. There's a whole subset of teachers who are aware of the difficulties the education system has in cultivating a sense of confidence in young people, and are looking for modalities that are often a little outside their training and the conventional tools they're used to using.

The conclusions from this study for French teachers are catastrophic: 88% of French teachers feel that their superiors are little or not at all concerned about their health and well-being... So it's massive. What's more, what emerges from the OECD's TALIS survey is that French teachers have a lower sense of competence in their ability to support students in difficulty than teachers in other OECD countries. These two aspects - a low sense of competence and a lack of support from their administrators - may explain why French teachers find it somewhat difficult to invest more in the implementation of more ambitious social emotional teaching methods.

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# DEVELOPING APPLICATIONS OF RESILIENCE IN YOUNG PEOPLE: PRINCIPLES AND APPROACHES

SUMMARIZING THE WORK AND INSIGHTS OF BONNIE BENARD, RESEARCHER IN THE  
FIELDS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND RESILIENCE

EDITED BY DOMINIQUE BENARD

*“Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity, adapt, recover, and regain access to a meaningful and productive life.” - Bonnie Benard*

**D**eveloping resilience can help adolescents withstand pressures and stress that can harm their mental health. Ten years ago, resilience theory was relatively new in the fields of prevention and education. Today, it is at the heart of hundreds of school and community programs that recognize the capacity of all young people to lead healthy and successful lives. Families, schools, after-school sports and community organizations play a key role in supporting the biological drive that exists in every individual for normal human development. It is particularly interesting to note that resilience most often prevails even in extreme situations, such as those provoked by poverty, troubled families, or violent neighborhoods.



**IT'S A LONG ROAD  
FOR YOUNG  
PEOPLE IN A  
CULTURE THAT  
MAKES MENTAL  
ILLNESS LESS  
VISIBLE AND  
SHAMEFUL**

## **RISK FACTORS**

Individuals may be exposed to factors in their environment that have negative effects on their environment and well-being. These unfavorable factors are referred to as risk factors. Education and social protection systems initially adopted an approach focused on risk factors. To explain antisocial behavior, delinquency, and crime, emphasis was placed on identifying risk factors such as poverty, alcoholism, lack of family support, and other psychological conditions. When risk factors are predominant, interactions between the environment and the individual become negative. The consequences for the individual's development, health, and social interactions can then be adverse. There are two types of risk factors: stressors and challenges.

## **STRESSORS**

When situations faced by an individual cause difficulties that exceed their ability to adapt, they become stressors and generate imbalances that affect physical and emotional well-being. Examples include:

Becoming isolated and lacking emotional support;

Being trapped in situations of failure that erode self-esteem and self-confidence;

Having to leave school due to a lack of family resources;

Experiencing traumatic events such as the death of a parent;

Being subject to physical, sexual or psychological abuse;

Interfering with an individual's ability to adapt to their environment.

## **CHALLENGES**

Challenges are events that disrupt an individual's life, sometimes in dramatic ways, such as an accident, illness, academic failure, moving, or parental divorce. But while stressors cause damage and are associated with a feeling of threat, challenges are generally perceived as calls to excel, grow, and develop. They are

associated with the possibility of future success. Depending on personal, environmental, and cultural differences, a dramatic life event may be experienced by some people as a stressor, while for others it will be nothing more than a challenge to overcome.

## **RISK FACTORS DO NOT EXPLAIN EVERYTHING**

Many risk factors have been identified that can have a negative impact on mental health during adolescence: puberty-related changes that cause anxiety, especially in girls; academic pressure when starting secondary school; social media and bullying; the availability of addictive substances; etc. When studying risk factors, we look for a causal relationship between a problem in the environment and negative consequences in individuals. However, risk factors do not explain everything; the cause-and-effect relationship is not sufficient to identify the root cause of a problem. For example, is the inability to manage conflict commonly experienced by adult alcoholics the cause or consequence of their addiction?

The risk factor approach tends to focus only on community problems and often overlooks the resources available to the community for solving these problems. How, then, should we respond? For example, viewing a community as having a series of risk factors for children, such as dysfunctional families, alcoholism, and drug abuse, does not promote the development of strategies to address these problems, since the resources available to reduce these risks remain unknown or are not implemented.

This type of risk analysis is now considered to provide a false sense of security by establishing prevention models focused on values rather than actions.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies on the long-term development of children exposed to risk factors have shown surprising results: a certain percentage of them develop problem behaviors, but most develop normally and become healthy and competent adults. "Research on resilience over the past two decades," writes Bonnie Benard, "has found that most children and young people, even those from highly stressed families or resource-poor communities, somehow manage to build decent lives for themselves."

These studies, which followed at-risk young people from childhood to the age of 30 or 40, conclude that the majority (up to 70 or 75%) manage to establish themselves in adulthood in a satisfactory manner. In other words they are married, have stable jobs, are satisfied with their relationships with their spouses and children, and are considered respectable citizens in their local communities. Yet they had had particularly difficult childhoods: some had been gang members or born to teenage mothers, others had been sexually abused or had parents who were drug addicts or mentally ill, and most had grown up in extreme poverty.

### **PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

What explains why, among young people facing risk factors, some succumb to stress and lose their physical or mental health while others resist all difficulties? The fact that some children are "resilient," meaning they are less or unaffected by risk factors and able to bounce back after experiencing hardship or failure, can be explained by the existence of protective factors in their social environment. Protective factors have been defined as individual characteristics, conditions, situations, and life events that appear to modify or reverse the predictions of negative outcomes, enabling the individual to overcome stressors.



### **THREE KEY FACTORS**

Bonnie Benard describes three main protective factors that young people need from their environment in order to develop resilience: caring and supportive relationships, messages of high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution. These factors are all necessary because they interact to create a dynamic protective process. For example, caring relationships without high expectations promote dependence rather than positive development in young people. Similarly, caring relationships with high expectations of young people but without opportunities for participation and active contribution will create a situation of frustration that risks blocking the natural process of young people's development.

### **ATTENTIVE AND CARING RELATIONSHIPS**

Resilient survivors who have endured tragic childhoods describe relationships characterized by "quiet



**IT'S ESSENTIAL TO  
MOBILIZE YOUTH  
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EDUCATION**

availability," a "fundamentally positive outlook," and "simple and enduring kindness": a touch on the shoulder, a smile, a greeting. In other words, affectionate support that goes beyond negative behaviors to seek out their causes rather than repressing them. Supportive relationships are essential "mediators" of development. They provide a reinforcing environment, good role models, and constructive feedback for physical, intellectual, psychological, and social growth.

**MESSAGES OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

Adults need to send positive and demanding messages to young people, expressing their deep conviction that young people are capable of questioning themselves and making progress, and encouraging them to become all that they can be. For many young people, discovering that adults believe in them when they themselves feel lost has been the catalyst for profound change. However, the high expectations that adults express towards young people must be based on the strengths, interests, hopes, and dreams of young

people themselves, not on what adults would like them to become. The goal is to awaken young people's intrinsic motivation, their innate desire to learn and flourish. It is about helping them to see the power they have to think differently and build an alternative story for their lives.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTION**

When we build a relationship with young people based on attention and kindness, when we express high expectations based on the resources, interests, and hopes we see in them, the logical next step is to offer them opportunities to participate and contribute in positive and meaningful ways. Participation in cooperative activities meets young people's strong need to belong to a peer group that can serve as a "surrogate family" if necessary. The peer group also provides young people with opportunities for reflection and dialogue on issues that are meaningful to them. For example, for adolescents, these issues may include boy-girl relationships, sexuality, communication within the family, drug use, etc.

Bonnie Bénard writes: "When educators provide young people with opportunities to share their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings, and encourage them to critically question the social messages they have received from the media or have been conditioned to construct, they empower them to become critical thinkers and decision makers about important issues in their own lives."

Creative expression activities across all art forms—writing, verbal expression, drama, graphic arts, photography, and video—provide young people with vital opportunities to participate in a group and develop transformative strengths of resilience.

Finally, opportunities for participation and contribution also include the possibility of engaging in collective projects that give young people the chance to exercise their problem-

solving, decision-making, and planning skills. In this way, they fulfill their need for freedom, responsibility, and self-determination. By taking on active roles in the group, they develop their capacity for autonomy and self-control. Bonnie Benard emphasizes that opportunities for young people to make authentic decisions and take responsibility distinguish truly effective and successful youth programs.

When these projects take the form of services to their families or the community, young people discover that they are capable of being active contributors. Being in a position to give back, to not just be a recipient of services but to provide real services to the community, strengthens their self-esteem. Bonnie Benard writes: "By having the opportunity to be heard, to express an opinion, to make choices, to have responsibilities, to engage in active problem solving, to express their imagination, work with and help others, and contribute their gifts to the community, young people develop the attitudes and skills characteristic of healthy development and successful learning, the personal strengths associated with social competence, problem solving, a positive sense of self, and a positive sense of the future."

## A POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE

The resilience of young people is the product of opportunities provided by parents, schools, and extracurricular organizations to enable them to develop their strengths and skills. It is therefore important to focus first and foremost on young people's resources and strengths, rather than their weaknesses.

Focusing first on young people's strengths and qualities. Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of Scouting, advised Scout leaders to focus on identifying young people's qualities rather than their weaknesses. Addressing weaknesses, he said, is pointless because by developing their



qualities, young people will quickly overcome their weaknesses. This is the approach known today as positive psychology and is widely embraced in education. It has the advantage of strengthening young people's self-esteem and self-confidence. On the other hand, if we focus primarily on weaknesses, we run the risk of discouraging young people and destroying their self-confidence. Without self-esteem and self-confidence, personal development is impossible. This positive language, which focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses, allows us to reframe our perspective on young people and begin to take into account not only the risks they face but also their incredible resilience, particularly those who face a range of challenges and adversities. Educators and parents must therefore learn to use language that describes human qualities that too often remain invisible, unidentified, and unrecognized.



### THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Contrary to popular belief, resilience is not the result of special innate qualities. Research suggests that all human beings are biologically prepared to develop resilience and use it for survival. Resilience is accessible to all of us. Bonnie Benard emphasizes that what seems to drive this development process is an internal force, an astonishing developmental wisdom, often referred to as intrinsic motivation, i.e., linked to deep psychological needs. Human beings are intrinsically motivated to satisfy their basic psychological needs, including the needs for belonging and affiliation, competence, autonomy, security, and meaning.

Because of our psychological need to belong, we seek to connect with others and therefore develop social competence. Psychologists call this drive the adaptive affiliation/belonging system. Because of our

psychological need to feel competent and autonomous, we seek to acquire cognitive problem-solving skills. We also seek relationships and opportunities that allow us to experience a sense of power and success. Psychologists call this the relational security system. Because of our need to find meaning in our lives, we seek out people, places, and transformative experiences that allow us to feel a sense of purpose and a sense of the future. How these needs are expressed and met varies, of course, not only within the same person over time, but also from person to person and from culture to culture. However, all human beings are driven to meet these needs throughout their lives. Developmental psychologists consider them to be fundamental adaptive systems of human protection. For young people, explains Bonnie Benard, whether these needs can be expressed in socially positive ways depends, to a large extent, on the people, places, and experiences they encounter in their families, schools, and communities.

### THE DYNAMIC QUALITY OF RESILIENCE

Resilience is not a fixed personality trait that one individual possesses and another lacks. These strengths have a dynamic, adaptive quality and are acquired through a process linked to the social environment and context. They are assets, but they can also represent a deficit in the event of imbalance. For example, a high level of attention to others that is not balanced by a capacity for autonomy can lead to harmful “co-dependence,” just as a high capacity for autonomy that is not balanced by sufficient attention to others can lead to selfishness and greed. The way in which strengths are viewed also varies across cultures. In Western societies, which tend to be individualistic, autonomy is a highly valued personal strength, while in more community-oriented cultures, such as those found across much of Africa, greater importance is placed on social skills and interpersonal abilities. Boys and

men are often expected to have a high level of autonomy, while girls and women are expected to be more attentive to others. However, both are equally necessary for girls and boys.

## THE ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

From a developmental psychology perspective, resilience is an essential survival skill that is intrinsically or biologically motivated and culturally expressed. It is a seemingly flawless adaptive system: survival needs lead to the development of health; the development of health leads to survival. But the problem is allowing these needs to be expressed in a healthy way, i.e., in a way that is culturally valued and socially positive.

When a child does not express one of the essential skills that promotes resilience—for example, empathy—it is not that they lack the will to be empathetic, but that in their environment, the expression of empathy is not valued and models of empathy are few or absent. If we really want young people to develop a propensity to behave empathetically, we need people who model empathy and create a climate in which empathy is the norm. If we want young people to have good problem-solving and decision-making skills, we must give them the opportunity to engage actively in problem-solving and to make real and meaningful decisions on issues that are important to them.

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR RESILIENCE

Once protective factors are in place, a virtuous circle will develop and contribute to the development of resilience: Protective factors (caring and supportive relationships, high expectations, opportunities for participation and contribution) in the environment (at the family, school, and community levels) meet the needs of young people (security, affection and belonging, respect, autonomy and power, challenge and mastery, meaning). Responding to young people's needs strengthens their

resilience and brings out the four main characteristics of resilient young people (social skills, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose). Increased resilience improves young people's outcomes: more appropriate social behavior, better health and well-being, improved academic performance, and less risky behavior. A better and broader understanding of these principles underlying resilience among service providers and parents can dramatically improve the lives of young people and societies at large.

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# MENTAL HEALTH AMBASSADORS

INTERVIEW WITH HÉLÈNE SALSI, PROGRAM COORDINATOR

BY ROLAND DAVAL

**F**irst of all, please introduce yourself to our readers.

I'm the coordinator of the "Mental Health Ambassadors" and I work for the Lyon-based foundation ARHM - Action, Recherche, Handicap et Santé Mentale. The foundation conducts delivery of services as well as advocacy with the aim of reducing stigma around mental health. In particular, it runs a psychiatric hospital, as well as health care and social services organizations such as ESATs (Etablissement et Service d'Accompagnement par le Travail), which are adapted for people with disabilities helping them integrate into the world of work. My mission is twofold:

- At a regional level, I support a team of mental health prevention officers and a psychologist who supervises the "Mental Health Ambassadors". This involves providing methodological support in preparing interventions and events.

- At a national level, I coordinate and lead the program and the network of social enterprises exchanging best practices, capitalizing on experience and lobbying institutions.

**When, why and how was "Mental Health Ambassadors" set up?**

The mental health and addiction unit of the ARHM Foundation - Institut Régional Jean Bergeret in Lyon, which includes prevention and support services, created this program in 2018 in response to the stigmatization of mental health among young people in particular. We had observed a high prevalence rate of mental health disorders among young people under the age of 25 with, at the same time, low access to mental health care. One in five young people described themselves as having depressive disorders, pointing out that the Covid crisis has contributed significantly to the deterioration of mental health, particularly among the most vulnerable and isolated.

**THIS PROGRAMME  
WAS CREATED IN  
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STIGMATIZATION  
OF MENTAL  
HEALTH  
CHALLENGES  
AMONG YOUNG  
PEOPLE**



**RECRUITMENT IS  
BASED ON  
MOTIVATION AND  
COMMITMENT**

And yet, clearly, the information was not getting through to young people, who were not making use of existing services. The Institut Jean Bergeret therefore wanted to develop a scheme that could speak directly to young people in a youth-to-youth, peer-to-peer approach. To this end, in 2018, the Institut Jean Bergeret began hosting a Civic Service Volunteer on its premises. To widely implement this project, the Institute approached Unis-Cité, an association created in 1994, governed by the law of 1901, a pioneer and expert in Civic Service for young people in France, and the two organizations have joined forces to co-develop the "Mental Health Ambassadors" scheme.

In 2019, a first class of Young Volunteers in Civic Service

has been recruited through Unis-Cité, trained and accompanied by the two organizations, so that these young people can then offer interventions, mental health awareness to other young people, young people aged 16 to 25 who will talk to other young people aged 16 to 25 within structures dedicated to young people: schools, young workers' hostels, animation structures, more broadly in any type of structure that welcomes young people aged 16 to 25. The overall duration of the civic service mission is 8 months.

Today, the scheme is present in France across 7 regions and 22 territories, and has expanded thanks to promotion of the model via social networks and mental health programs beyond the ARHM Foundation. The Falret Foundation is an example for deployment in Ile de France or, in Reims, Le Club Famille - Association L'Amitié.

In 2024, 188 volunteers were involved, including 69 in the Auvergne Rhône-Alpes region.

Volunteers are recruited from a wide range of backgrounds: they may be students, particularly in psychology, but they can also be young people who have lost their way and are looking for a professional future. To this end, Unis-Cité helps them to resume their studies, or to find or create a job.

There are no skill-based recruitment criteria, but recruitment is based on motivation and commitment to the theme of mental health. However, it is important to ensure that young people have the

emotional and mental availability to commit themselves to this theme, they will meet other young people with potential difficulties and questions. They need to be able to take a step back from themselves, and position themselves as neutral peers and preventionists, without being mental health professionals.

**More specifically, how does the program work, and what is the missions of the "Mental Health Ambassadors"?**

First of all, let's remember that the aim of the "Mental Health Ambassadors" is to train and support Young Volunteers in Civic Service to work with young people of the same age (16-25) in order to:

- Reduce the stigma attached to mental health: turn tomorrow's adults into citizens aware of mental health issues and representations.
- Identify young people in mental distress: by making young people including young professionals aware of the early signs of unwellness.
- Referring young people to local prevention and care services by identifying and promoting local care and support structures

Volunteers begin their civic service assignment in October with an initial two-week integration phase organized by Unis-Cité. They then follow a training course on mental health prevention as a peer, organized and run by the local mental health structure, supplemented by training provided by Unis-Cité on cross-cutting themes such as civic



commitment, project management and, more generally, everything that is common to the civic service volunteer cycle. The training lasts one month.

In the Auvergne Rhône-Alpes region, the ARHM foundation organizes a five-day training course that includes mental health first aid. The training, open to all, aims to not only raise awareness and destigmatize mental health disorders but teaches people to distinguish different situations and know how to guide a person in need of support. It is important for the project leader to clearly identify the extent to which the ambassadors are able to intervene in the support requested by youth organizations, as they are sometimes asked to intervene in complex situations, such as those following suicide attempts.

**THE AIM OF « MENTAL HEALTH AMBASSADORS » IS TO TRAIN AND SUPPORT YOUNG VOLUNTEERS IN CIVIC SERVICE**



**THE  
AMBASSADORS'  
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A LATER STAGE.**

The ambassadors open dialogue that helps to deconstruct preconceived ideas and change perceptions of mental health and mental health professionals, both in terms of prevention and care. They also aim to promote and act as a link with existing prevention and care systems for which they can in no way be a substitute. Rather they are facilitators, companions and mediators.

***What are the main actions implemented; where and how? With what resources?***

The ambassadors work in organizations that welcome young people and request their support.

These volunteers work in teams, usually in pairs or groups of three, for cycles of 3 or 4 sessions each lasting an hour and a half to two hours. They may also set up a station where young people can come ask questions or have a chat. The groups, comprised of a

maximum of fifteen, are held where they can comfortably talk and exchange ideas. Sometimes, we combine the work of the young ambassadors with prevention sessions organized, for example, by the association Addictions France, which enables us to tackle specific subjects that the ambassadors are not in a position to tackle. In any case, the ambassadors' interventions should act as levers to enable more specialized, more in-depth interventions at a later date

It's also about networking, and the ambassadors' work is carried out with the support of the Agence Régionale de Santé (ARS), notably within the framework of territorial mental health. In order to assess the impact of these actions in relation to the objectives of the program, questionnaires are completed by beneficiaries, in particular on how they felt about the intervention: did it enable them to gain a better understanding of mental health, to feel more at ease about consulting a health professional, or to be able to identify solutions to improve their health.

We also assess the impact of the program on the volunteers themselves: awareness of mental health issues, empowerment, empowerment and commitment, career guidance.

Financial resources come, of course, from the State's funding of civic service, but the ARHM Foundation, Unis-Cité and the other project sponsors seek public or private funding from Agences Régionales de Santé, Assurance Maladie, Conseils Départementaux or mutual insurance companies such as AG2R La Mondiale.

***Does this system exist in other countries? How do you see it developing?***

A scheme of this kind exists in the United States, and we've been approached by Belgium, with the first batch of Mental Health Ambassadors due to be deployed in Switzerland in 2025. For Switzerland, we're looking at a different model of commitment, as civic service doesn't exist.

We're continuing to think about developing the program in France, including responding to requests from overseas territories, by looking for partnerships.

Our ambition is to cover the whole country, as closely as possible to local life.

We are also looking at ways of reaching out to isolated young people. This is a major challenge, particularly in rural areas, where we are in contact with local authorities. Contacts are also being made with the Protection Judiciaire de la Jeunesse.

***In the various presentations you've given, have you identified any particular issues concerning the mental health of young people?***

These issues are at the heart of what the ambassadors can and can't do, with, for example, workshops on destigmatizing mental health, on identification and referral solutions, and on psychosocial skills.

It's important to remember, however, that mental health issues can affect us all, to different degrees and with different solutions. Of course, mental health issues for young people can be approached through the prism of specific themes from eco-anxiety and addiction to pressure at school, cyber-bullying, and sleep, issues.

To address all these issues included the ambassador's use of fun tools such as maps of mental health resources and in Grenoble, one accompanied by role cards that refers to general practitioners, psychologists and many other roles and conditions. For instance, situations involving unhappiness are presented, and one must reply indicating which situations could be linked and which role should be called upon. Then a given role having been chosen must be located on the map. For psychosocial skills we use the strengths game through questions such as what are your strengths, i.e. your emotional, cognitive and affective resources, and take advantage of this presentation to question preconceived ideas regarding what may be true or false. We were also introduced to another tool for dealing with sleep and Monododo, based on the game Monopoly.

**WE ARE ALSO  
LOOKING AT WAYS  
OF REACHING OUT  
TO ISOLATED  
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PARTICULARLY IN  
RURAL AREAS**

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# NETFLIX'S ADOLESCENCE

BY ADAM CLARK

EMPOWERING STUDENTS AND INDIVIDUALS TO THRIVE | SCHOOL COUNSELOR & PRIVATE COUNSELING PRACTITIONER

## WHAT NETFLIX'S ADOLESCENCE GETS RIGHT (AND URGENTLY SHOWS US) ABOUT RAISING BOYS IN A DIGITAL AGE

*Part 1 of a multi-part series of upcoming posts*

**N**etflix's *Adolescence* is more than a coming-of-age drama—it's a mirror held up to a generation navigating identity, isolation, and influence in a rapidly changing world. Centered around a 12-year-old boy, the series follows the aftermath of his descent into turmoil amidst a landscape that's all too familiar to educators, counselors, and parents alike: social toxicity, adult absence, and the ever-expanding influence of online ideologies.

At its heart, *Adolescence* is a reminder to question our assumptions about the well-being of our children. And for those of us working to support young people's development—whether in schools,

clinics, or homes—it's a powerful affirmation of how vital our work is.

### AGES 11–13: VULNERABLE, CAPABLE, AND STILL REACHABLE

Early adolescence—roughly ages 11 to 13—is often misunderstood. Children at this stage are beginning to assert independence, yet they remain deeply tied to the emotional tone and structure of the adults in their lives. When those adults are available, consistent, and responsive, we can remain a primary source of connection, identity, and grounding.

But this is also the age when peer relationships intensify. Young people begin to look laterally—to classmates, online communities, influencers—for cues about how to belong and who to be. When supportive peer relationships are missing, they don't just feel alone—they can feel completely lost.

That sense of disconnection fuels a powerful need to find belonging somewhere. The drive



Adam Clark



## ADOLESCENCE IS NOT ABOUT CONTROL BUT PROXIMITY, TRUST AND CONSISTENCY

to connect is not optional—it's hardwired. If caring adults and peers don't help fill that space with reflection, purpose, and a sense of safety, something else may.

### THAT'S THE OPPORTUNITY—AND THE RESPONSIBILITY.

At this stage, adults still matter immensely. But we must be intentional:

- Know what your child is doing, watching, and engaging with—both online and in the community. This isn't a call to create a surveillance state, but it is a call to keep communication open and active.
- Talk about it. Not just once. Not just when there's a problem. Often, and without judgment.
- Guide, don't dictate. Invite them into problem-solving and critical thinking. Be a steady resource—someone they can turn to and trust.
- Stay present, even when they push away. Look for ways to connect: go out

for ice cream, offer a ride, ask about their favorite shows or games. Let them teach you something about their world.

Adolescence is not about control but proximity, trust, and consistency. The show doesn't just illustrate what can happen when that's missing—it calls on all of us to step in before the silence becomes too deep to reach.

What were your reactions and thoughts? In my home, Episode 4 sparked a two-hour conversation with my partner and one of our adult children filled with sharing, insight, and reflection. I'd love to hear how it landed for you.

### POSTSCRIPT

Adolescence is an incredibly well-crafted series, but like many dramatizations, it takes some creative liberties, particularly in its portrayals of counseling, systemic response, and adolescent psychology. While these choices may serve the narrative, they're also worth unpacking. I'll be exploring a few of those nuances in upcoming posts.

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE—BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE VILLAGE IS ABSENT OR UNWELL?

*Part 2 of a multi-part series on Netflix's Adolescence.*

*In the first post of this series, I focused on the developmental window of early adolescence and the critical role parents and caregivers play in staying connected. But Adolescence doesn't just point to the home—it shines a light on the broader, often fragmented,*

*landscape that surrounds many young people.*

The series invites us to ask:

- Where are the coaches, the mentors, the youth workers?
- Where is the school staff that knows each child's name and story?
- Where are the community structures that offer belonging, identity, and purpose?

In Episode 2—shot primarily inside the students' school—we witness both the learned helplessness and, in some places, the astounding resilience of young people left to navigate emotionally hostile environments without adequate adult support. Adolescence portrays a school climate that is reactive rather than restorative, where bullying festers and cruelty becomes a kind of currency.

While it would be unfair to claim this is an accurate picture of all state schools in the UK, it would also be naive to imagine that schools like this don't exist—and perhaps even more misguided to assume that affluence offers some kind of panacea. When adults are disengaged or disempowered, children are left to fend for themselves in what can become a feral social hierarchy.

Outside school, the absence is just as stark. The main character, Jamie, drifts through his town with little structure and few touchpoints. There are no after-school programs, no trusted public spaces, no visible community leaders to offer positive engagement. That vacuum—perhaps felt most acutely within the perceived "safety" of his own room—becomes an opening for



misinformation, manipulation, and dangerous belonging.

#### **WHEN THE VILLAGE FAILS, OTHER ANSWERS FILL THE VOID**

The series leaves much of the explanatory heavy lifting to the viewer—offering little insight into how a boy from a relatively affluent home comes to embrace a violent worldview. But what it does portray reflects a familiar and deeply concerning reality. As introduced in the first post, in the absence of meaningful connection, young people go searching for identity, certainty, and belonging.

From that foundation, I explored how online communities and influencers target and radicalize boys and young men. This is where the manosphere enters. These loosely connected online spaces offer simple, seductive answers to complex struggles related to:

- **Insecurity** - Framing dominance, control, or "success" as the only valid response to self-doubt.
- **Masculinity** - Promoting rigid, often aggressive

**WE WITNESS BOTH THE LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND THE ASTOUNDING RESILIENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE**



**SCHOOLS ARE MORE THAN LEARNING SPACES, THEY ARE CULTURAL AND RELATIONAL ECOSYSTEMS**

- ideals of what it means to be a man.
- **Societal Expectations** - Presenting the world as unfairly stacked against boys and men.
- **Relationships** - Reducing women to either sources of validation or threats to male autonomy.
- **Body Image** - Reinforcing hyper-masculine appearance standards as measures of worth.

It's not difficult to see how these messages can resonate with boys who feel invisible, misunderstood, or angry.

**SCHOOLS AS VILLAGE BUILDERS**

If we want to counter these narratives, we must recognize that schools are more than learning spaces – they are cultural and relational ecosystems. As educators, we strive to make school

communities one of the most consistent structures in a young person's life—spaces that proactively support identity development, belonging, and critical consciousness.

Adolescence reminds us that there are key areas to prioritize:

- **Identity Development** - Support students in exploring who they are beyond restrictive gender roles, encouraging personal reflection and self-acceptance.
- **Relationship Education** - Build real understanding of what mutual respect, trust, and care look and feel like in everyday interactions.
- **Confidence and Self-Worth** - Foster environments that build self-esteem through affirming feedback, strengths-based recognition, and positive body image messaging.
- **Critical Thinking and Media Literacy** - Help students analyze online content and societal narratives critically, not passively—encouraging thoughtful engagement over absorption.
- **Emotional Regulation and Resilience** - Introduce practices that build emotional awareness, reduce stress, and strengthen interpersonal empathy.

Our remit is to intentionally shape the spaces where young people grow, connect, and make sense of themselves and the world around them. When the rest of the village is absent—or unwell—this kind of school environment becomes not just supportive, but essential.

What are you seeing in your own community or school? Are these

messages showing up among students you work with—and how are you responding?

### **FURTHER READING: UNDERSTANDING THE MANOSPHERE AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUTH**

If you're looking to deepen your understanding of how the manosphere influences boys and young men—and what we can do about it—these resources offer a solid starting point:

#### **WHAT IS THE MANOSPHERE?**

- **Equimundo** - "What is the Manosphere?" - A clear and concise overview of the manosphere and how its narratives target boys and men.
- **Internet Matters** - "What Is the Manosphere and Why Is It a Concern?" - An accessible resource for educators and parents that breaks down key manosphere platforms, risks, and warning signs.

#### **RESEARCH AND ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES**

- "YouTube as a Gateway to the Manosphere" (PMC / NIH) - A peer-reviewed study analyzing how YouTube's recommendation algorithms can lead users into increasingly extreme misogynistic content.

#### **MEDIA AND SYSTEMIC RESPONSES**

- NPR - "Adolescence: A New Netflix Drama About the Radicalization of Young Boys" - A compelling conversation with the show's co-creator, Stephen Graham, about the broader social issues it highlights, including parenting, peer influence, and ideology.
- The Guardian - "UK Counter-Terror Police Track Misogynistic Online Networks" - An investigation into how law enforcement is beginning to take online misogyny seriously as a radicalizing force among young men.

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# MENTAL HEALTH FIRST-AID TRAINING IN FRANCE

EXTRACT FROM THE PSSM FRANCE WEBSITE

**P**SSM France is a non-profit association founded in 2018 by Infipp, Santé Mentale France and Unafam as part of a dynamic partnership. Faced with the general population's lack of knowledge about mental health, PSSM France is committed to combating the stigmatization of mental disorders. This stigma is a powerful barrier to access to care, recovery and social and professional inclusion. To carry out its mission, the association has adapted the MHFA® (Mental Health First Aid) training program to the French context, licensing it for the whole of France.

Created in Australia in 2000 by Betty Kitchener, an educator who had suffered from severe mental illness, and Tony Jorm, a professor of medicine, this program offers general training in mental health awareness and assistance to all citizens. It is scientifically validated: all the knowledge presented in the course has been

selected on the basis of its level of evidence and international consensus.

This knowledge is regularly reviewed. The scientific evaluation process is essential at every stage of the MHFA program, from its construction to the evaluation of its effects. In 2022, PSSM France set up a Scientific and Educational Council, a review body for the development and validation of the association's teaching materials.

## OBJECTIVES AND MISSIONS

Mental health is a major public health issue and the deployment of mental health first aid in France is part of the government's strategy to address the issue. It is one of 30 measures set out at the Assises conference on mental health and psychiatry with a goal to train 750,000 'mental health first aiders' by 2030. The association is responsible for



**Premiers  
Secours  
en Santé  
Mentale**  
France

APPRENDRE À AIDER



**FIRST-AIDERS GAIN  
GENERAL  
KNOWLEDGE OF  
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MENTAL HEALTH  
AND LEARN HOW  
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PSSM France is pursuing its development by adapting mental health first aid to two particularly at-risk groups: adolescents and the elderly.

**THE TRAINING**

The Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) program trains aspiring first-aiders to spot mental health problems, adopt appropriate behavior, provide information on available resources, encourage people to go to the right professionals and, in the event of a crisis, act to relay the information to the most appropriate service.

It is inspired by physical first-aid training, but incorporates a different emergency logic: a mental health first-aider will often have to intervene several times to listen, reassure and accompany the person concerned towards care. In a societal context where mental disorders are downplayed and stigmatized, training in mental health first aid is part of a civic-minded approach. We can all take

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action at our own level! According to the World Health Organization, one human being in four will suffer either a pathological episode or a persistent disorder during his or her lifetime. That's why Mental Health First Aid training is for everyone. This training develops a method for learning to help, in which over five million people worldwide have already been trained. In France, the program was launched in 2019 and has been rolling out ever since. Two types of training are offered: PSSM Standard and PSSM Young People.

### **PSSM STANDARD**

The Mental Health First Aid Standard training program pursues four pedagogical objectives:

- Acquire basic knowledge of mental health disorders,
- Gain a better understanding of the different types of mental health crisis,
- Develop interpersonal skills (listening without judgment, reassuring and giving appropriate information),
- Handle aggressive behavior.

First-aiders gain general knowledge of the field of mental health, including the four most common psychological disorders (depressive, anxiety, psychotic and substance-related disorders), and learn how to intervene when faced with a person in crisis or difficulty.

### **PSSM YOUNG PEOPLE**

The Young People training course has been specially developed for adults living or working with teenagers (middle and high school) and young people of legal age. It focuses in particular on adolescent development, anxiety disorders, depression (including suicidal crisis and non-suicidal self-mutilation), psychoses, eating disorders and addictions. As the percentage of mental health first aiders continues to grow in France the prospect that young people

will receive the immediate support matching their conditions are increasing. Promoting first aid programming will only diminish negative mental health initiatives. For further information: <https://www.pssmfrance.fr/etre-secouriste/>



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# MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE: A MAJOR NATIONAL CONCERN AND FOCUS FOR 2025

**INTERVIEW WITH THIBAUT DE SAINT-POL, DIRECTOR OF YOUTH AND  
ASSOCIATIVE LIFE, INTERMINISTERIAL DELEGATE FOR YOUTH, MINISTRY OF  
YOUTH.**

**BY ROLAND DAVAL**

**H**ello Monsieur de Saint-Pol, thank you for agreeing to this interview. Could you introduce yourself to our readers?

I'm a sociologist by training. For five years, I directed the Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l'Éducation Populaire (INJEP). We carried out a great deal of work there, which went beyond scientific and statistical analysis and was based on realities in the field. The aim was to evaluate our experience then promote and publicize our findings. This is just what we did at the Fonds d'Expérimentation pour la Jeunesse (Experimental Youth Fund), convinced that practitioners in youth programming, popular education and sport all hold invaluable knowledge that complements studies carried out by sociologists.

Subsequently, I was Chief of Staff to the Secretary of State for Youth and Associative Life. This career path led me to become Director of Youth, Popular Education and Associative Life (DJEPVA), as well as Interministerial

Delegate for Youth, within the Ministry of Sports, Youth and Associative Life.

**What is the mission of the DJEPVA?**

Our mission is to accompany young people in all their diversity towards emancipation, with a strong priority in support for advancing equal opportunities. This ambition is in line with the practices of popular education, and is based on collective work with educational and social service organizations.

The DJEPVA operates on a model of co-construction: our public policies are based on strong partnerships with associations and local authorities. Our own administration also applies the principles in its management.

We coordinate youth policies between ministries: health, housing, integration, higher education, etc. This coherent approach is essential. Here's a concrete example: in 2024, we brought together an inter-departmental committee made up of twenty central government departments to work together on youth involvement. We share studies, data and systems, with concrete short-



Mr Thibault de Saint-Pol

**IT'S A LONG ROAD FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN A CULTURE THAT MAKES MENTAL ILLNESS LESS VISIBLE AND SHAMEFUL.**

and medium-term objectives. We are convinced that these policies enable young people to acquire essential skills. Young people are getting more and more involved, especially since COVID, but they are taking on fewer responsibilities. And the most disadvantaged often remain on the sidelines. These are all challenges to which we must respond together. In this respect, popular education plays a fundamental role outside school, providing young people with useful skills for their future.

***In terms of mental health, what are the main findings of your ministry?***

The data we have are worrying. The OECD 2022 report shows that 49% of young people have unmet mental health needs, compared with 23% of adults.

There are many signs of distress: dropping out of school, addictions, violence... Eco-anxiety and other sources of stress add to this complex reality.

Anxiety and depression syndromes have risen sharply since COVID. Confinement has led to a loss of social ties that is detrimental to well-being. But this trend was already present.

Our annual DJEPVA barometer, conducted by INJEP with Crédoc, shows a renewed optimism among young people, but there are still many serious mental disorders. The subject is also still taboo in our society. It's often perceived as shameful, which prevents people from seeking help.

This brings to mind the recent testimony of a young woman. Last week, we were with the Prime Minister and Minister Marie BARSACQ at the Nightline association - a telephone helpline run by students. This young woman, who was very involved in sport and wanted to become a top competitor, suffered injuries and thus saw her dream come to an end. With this dream gone, she entered a spiral of depression and low self-esteem, which she didn't dare share with her parents and closed up on herself. Thanks to the listening skills of the

association's volunteers, she became aware of her need for support and was able to begin rebuilding her life. This underlines the need for appropriate, caring and accessible support.

It's a long road for young people in a culture that makes mental illness less visible and shameful, and so it's a real difficulty to address this subject with young people and provide the support needed.

Hence the decision, in 2025, to make mental health a major national cause for the entire population, but particularly for young people. Throughout the year, the aim is to mobilize the whole of society - public services and civil society as a whole, around an action plan designed to change the way mental health is viewed in France.

***What are the main priorities of the action plan for young people?***

Three priorities have been identified:

1. Prevention and detection must be implemented as early as possible, and this is absolutely crucial. The first signs of ill-health often appear in adolescence and early adulthood, setting young men and women on a path of depression and social withdrawal risking a dangerous and harmful downward spiral.
2. Combating stigmatization and changing the way people look at mental health are also priorities. Young people are particularly sensitive to other people's views, and this is especially important at a time when building they are typically constructing their sense of self and their own, independent lives. The influence of social networks on self-image compared with that of other influences is a newer and added reality to be managed.
3. Acting on social determinants is the 3rd priority. The age of youth is, of course, the age when pathways to the future are forged and social inequalities are also created. Isolation, difficulties of orientation, professional integration and financial challenge are

are all factors that can have an impact on mental health.

To take action, it's vital to involve families, educational institutions, social organizations and, more broadly, young people directly. These are the support networks for young people in distress.

**What is your action plan for young people?**

As part of the interdepartmental action plan currently under development, we are focusing in three main areas.

The first is to take a positive approach to the subject by developing psychosocial skills.

Psychosocial skills (social emotional skills) encompass relational, emotional and cognitive abilities, such as stress management, benevolent communication, empathy and self-confidence. They must be integrated into all educational activities, from school to extracurricular activities.

At DJEPVA, we believe that acting on these skills is fundamental. Popular education, vacations, scouting and commitment are all effective levers. Since August 2022, a national strategy has framed this action in schools, higher education, vacation centers and so on.

It also involves training professionals and volunteers, and ensuring that these skills are recognized as essential, just as reading or mathematics.

We work in close collaboration with the French Ministry of Education, whose curriculum is evolving and psychosocial skills are now taken into account. Recruiters also need to know how to value them.

Training courses are offered in the Youth and Sports diplomas (e.g. BPJEPS) and to agents of decentralized services to enable them to better recognize, support and finance local projects devoted to psychosocial skills. Popular education associations, scouting organizations and civil services are fully mobilized in this direction as well.



Awareness-raising campaigns accompany this dynamic, with guides, practical information sheets and educational tools created by the DJEPVA.

The second priority is to inform the general public and combat stigmatization.

We rely on the Information Jeunesse network (over 1,000 state-approved structures) to provide young people with free, anonymous guidance. This non-stigmatizing network provides information on careers counseling, employment search, housing, health and more. This network is particularly interesting because it is comprehensive, welcomes young people anonymously, free and non-stigmatizing. The PAEJ (Points Accueil Ecoute Jeunes) network provides an opportunity for discussing mental health issues with young people and, if necessary, to organize rapid treatment in the event of mental distress by putting them in touch with a specialist who can provide immediate support.

In Ile-de-France, the Centre de Ressources et d'Information Jeunesse (CRIJ) has a website that is visited by several million young people. The site



Strasbourg Teen Center

**IT'S ESSENTIAL TO MOBILIZE YOUTH ASSOCIATIONS AND, MORE BROADLY, ALL THOSE INVOLVED IN ASSOCIATIONS AND POPULAR EDUCATION**

offers practical resources such as how to deal with stress, harassment and school phobia, which is consulted frequently by young people. Access is increased as it is written in language accessible for young people and therefore more easily applied.

On the subject of addiction, which is closely linked to mental health, we have a special website, "Non aux addictions, oui à ma santé", specially designed for young people to inform them about the risks associated with addiction.

The third priority is to strengthen the Maisons Des Adolescents - Teen Centers (MDA).

There are currently 125 MDAs. The Prime Minister wants to triple this number in three years, to cover a wider range of local needs. These centers offer reception, listening, guidance and multidisciplinary support (doctors, psychologists, social workers, legal experts), in conjunction with PAEJs, CMPs and local players. Their name is not stigmatizing, which facilitates access.

The challenge: how can we better coordinate the work of all the players involved?

It's essential to mobilize youth associations and, more broadly, all those involved in associations and popular education who are active in extracurricular activities. Indeed, for a child who regularly participates in these activities, it's more time spent than in front of a teacher, representing 30% of the child's time.

These are less structured times of life, in which, thanks to the active teaching methods used and the greater proximity, young people are confronted with a different positioning by those who work with them and, it is our conviction, have an impact on mental health by developing young people's self-confidence and autonomy.

There are many examples of this, and the symposia organized by UCPA and the Scouts et Guides de France provide opportunities to share best practices in supporting young people, and to help improve the training of leaders who sometimes feel helpless in the face of growing addiction problems, for example.

The training of supervisors, the co-construction of training modules on psychosocial skills with associative partners, and the integration of mental health issues into youth work are all subjects on which we are mobilizing interest and attention.

It's especially crucial that actions of the national education system are well coordinated with extracurricular activities and families, as is the case with certain cities and territories. It is important to note that mental health is also a family issue. Parents need to be listened to and supported, especially when it comes to accompanying a child with mental health problems.

***What resources are mobilized?***

In terms of the resources and funding mobilized, this is one of the key areas of focus for the Grande Cause Nationale 2025 project, in that we're trying to coordinate and implement

them effectively to achieve leveraging effects.

Specific calls for projects will be launched, but we have already highlighted the theme of mental health in all calls for projects aimed at youth and popular education associations, and we want to give it its rightful place in multi-year funding agreements. Funding is also available for training courses for professionals and volunteers.

This should also provide an opportunity to push for institutional partnerships between our decentralized services and local players so as to make more progress on these issues of mental health for young people.

***What are the main results expected from this year devoted to young people's mental health?***

Briefly, we want to make progress on four objectives.

The first is to improve access to care. We want to drastically reduce the rate of non-use of mental health care services among young people, to ensure that responses are created in case of need, and that young people have access to local services and are aware of them. The aim is to facilitate referrals through a denser network of structures such as the Maisons Des Adolescents, and better information via the youth information network.

The second objective is to reinforce prevention and resilience. This means developing psychosocial skills from a very young age, to limit risk-taking behavior and school dropout. We need to create a benevolent and reassuring environment in schools, vacation and leisure centers, and associations, which brings us back to the question of training professionals and volunteers.

The third objective is to change the way we look at young people's mental health, and to reduce stigmatization. We need to raise awareness throughout the educational community and the voluntary sector; make mental health a subject that is



Info-truck, mobile information center for young people

taken seriously; promote the initiatives of citizens and associations in the field; and share best practices.

We need to ensure that mental health remains a cross-functional, cross-departmental priority in all our public youth policies, beyond this 2025 'Year of the Great Cause'. This means guaranteeing follow-up and evaluation of what is put in place. Statisticians and researchers will be mobilized to better study and measure the mental health of young people, and to enable us to continuously adjust the actions implemented to make continuous and concrete progress.

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Photo from the film «The dead Poets Society»

# STUDYING AT A REBELLIOUS AGE: LEARNING AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DILEMMAS

BY MARIA HELENA ALMEIDA CARVALHO AND MATHEUS BATALHA MOREIRA NERY

**T**he idea that school can be a haven from life's problems and emotions is an illusion.

In the film "Dead Poets Society" (1989), the plot begins with the arrival of a new teacher, who encourages his pupils to free themselves from life's oppressions.

One of the characters, Neil Perry, discovers his passion for the arts. However, to pursue his vocation, he must confront the expectations of his own family, who forbid him any personal choice. At his school, he finds no opportunity for dialogue, with the exception of the inspiring lessons of Professor John Keating, mentor to the students who form the Society of Missing Poets.

Neil Perry can no longer accept the unbearable weight of his own family, and takes his own life.

In another film, "The Fate of Will Hunting" (1997), a poor young

man from South Boston, born into a dysfunctional and violent family, takes up the study of advanced mathematics as a hobby. He gets hired as a janitor and cleans the halls of MIT, one of the world's most prestigious universities, every day.

On boards posted in the corridors, which he cleans every day, professors have posted mathematical equations. It didn't take Will long to solve them. When he is discovered, he is already in prison, having been involved in a street brawl.

The MIT professor makes a deal with the judge to release Will, on condition that he undergoes therapy. And so begins a long psychological journey that will give new meaning to Will Hunting's life.

Both films help us to reflect on the relationships between emotional states, their development and the learning associated with them.





Itabaian, Sergipe. Brasil

**FROM A  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
POINT OF VIEW, IT  
IS NECESSARY TO  
ESTABLISH A  
RELATIONSHIP  
WITH KNOWLEDGE  
IN ORDER TO  
PROGRESS IN  
LEARNING**

On the other side of the planet, in the French world, three authors stand out for having tried to better understand the boundaries between obstacles to learning and socio-emotional dilemmas. Bernard Charlot, professor at the University of Paris 8 and visiting researcher at the Federal University of Sergipe, has engaged in research linked to the relationship to knowledge, the relationship to school and the meaning that students from working-class backgrounds attribute to studying and to the school they attend. The main element of Charlot's theory (2000) is precisely the meaning that working-class students attribute to the studies and school they attend. As human beings, we give importance to what we want to learn and

through the relationship we establish with this knowledge.

From a psychological point of view, the idea that it is necessary to establish a relationship with knowledge in order to progress in learning also draws on Vygotsky's (1978) theory, since the desire to learn, however profound, is rooted in a global social and historical context, formed millennia before the birth of contemporary students. The criticism here is that, although we as educators want to make sound the relationship our students have with knowledge, often, despite what we think, our students are far more emotionally interested in reconstructing the often broken world in which they live.

Alain Coulon is a French sociologist and professor of education at the Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis. He has worked on the transition from high school to university. Students leave a world where things are organized for them, such as class schedules, materials, the teaching-learning process and recreation, since teachers act as organizers of pedagogical work. They enter higher education, where autonomy reigns, and this transition is not a smooth one: students are often unable to decipher the implicit rules that govern this world, while being put under psychological pressure to read an avalanche of books and develop critical thinking through writing and debating ideas. The crux of this sociological theory is that those who don't form an institutional affiliation - that is, who don't learn some of the hidden rules of academia - often drop out. This is a process experienced emotionally, beyond the rationalities imposed by the academic model.

It is precisely these emotional wounds that Boris Cyrulnik focuses on. A Holocaust survivor, he worked for years with children who had also survived Nazi atrocities, helping them to overcome the traumas arising from this terrible experience. The central concept of his work is precisely resilience, which can be defined, in simple terms, as the ability to adapt to the multiple adversities we face throughout our lives. It is not an innate characteristic, as it is the product of our social reality. Resilience is fundamentally a social skill. Humor plays a central role in this respect, as it enables us to cultivate and attach other meanings to our sad experiences. Negative labels, such as bullying and other forms of aggression, are, for obvious reasons, extremely detrimental to resilience. Finally, resilience requires children and adolescents to have a meaningful purpose or goal in life.

Research into learning often focuses on developing better teaching methodologies, overlooking the multiple school traumas caused by a divided and fractured world. We need to recognize that questioning the reality in which we live is part of the emotional journey of adolescence. The point here is to help students move on from their traumas to a new, assumed sense of their own being. Labeling them as rebels or fitting them into a certain rule of conformity has the opposite effect, whereas what we really need is to broaden the possibilities of understanding and make school a space where dialogue and debate about emotions are possible.

The impact of social reality on learning



University of Sergipe

Let's imagine a small town nestled in the middle of northeastern Brazil. Its climate is hot and, in fact, walking down the street at midday for most of the year is almost an act of faith. Called Itabaiana, it has no buildings higher than four storeys. Commerce is flourishing. The bakeries and market are among the best in Sergipe, Brazil's smallest state. Anyone visiting this town will immediately notice the mountain range that surrounds its neighborhoods and easily imagine that this town was an important trading post during the colonial years, when miles to the east there were numerous sugarcane farms, then responsible for a significant share of national production, and to the west, in the distance,

## **QUESTIONING THE REALITY IN WHICH WE LIVE IS PART OF THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY OF ADOLESCENCE**

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cotton was planted for many decades.

The schools in this small town don't have much in the way of infrastructure. As a result, the heat is easily transmitted to its classrooms, which are largely occupied by children and teenagers living in small villages around the town. During the Covid-19 pandemic, classes were suspended. Pupils, who had access to television, watched educational programs whenever they could, designed to teach them a little of everything the school has to offer. When classes resumed, and it was thought that the students' needs would be academic, the teachers experienced increased anxiety and depression among their students.

The challenges arising from this scenario are numerous. In the state of Sergipe, between 2020 and 2022, research conducted with the support of the Sergipe State Secretariat for Education and Culture showed that psychological demands when returning to the classroom after the pandemic included, in addition to learning difficulties, cases of violence, suicidal ideation and violation of rights (ALVES et al., 2022; SOUZA et al., 2022).

Thus, in this case study, we sought to understand how teachers in a public school construct their educational practices in the classroom after the pandemic, as well as the relationship between these practices and their perceptions of students' socio-emotional development.

Training in developmental psychology plays a key role here, as it enables teachers to better perceive the different nuances that make up Brazilian social reality, its impacts on

socio-emotional learning, and the needs they present in the teaching and learning process.

In summary, the research for this case study was developed in two parts, with a qualitative and longitudinal approach. Semi-structured interviews with teachers to better understand their perspectives on socio-emotional development and the multiple psychological issues affecting schools. A group of 10 primary school teachers was formed, 7 of whom participated to the end.

This group experienced two moments. In the first stage, art education workshops were developed following the three stages structured by Sommer (2014) for through the Pre-Texts methodology, a teaching methodology focused on art education, which works on the basis of three fundamental pillars:

1. researchers choose a challenging and stimulating text;
2. participants use it as a basis for creating art education material in group workshops;
3. everyone reflects together on the process.

Pre-Texts is based primarily on Brazilian researchers, notably Freire (1974) and Boal (1988; 2009). In contrast to the conventional approach to teaching and research common in many countries, the invitation to "play" with a complex text and enjoy a variety of reconstructions of meaning has proved effective in analyzing the multiple elements that make up everyday school life. As an action deeply linked to pedagogical reflection, this methodology is configured as an important vehicle for analyzing pedagogical practices and

debating teachers' perceptions of students' socio-emotional development.

Two passages from complex texts were chosen to be worked on in the workshops, namely: the novel "Charrue Tordue", written by Brazilian novelist Itamar Vieira (2019), and the short story "La Troisième Rive du Fleuve", written by world-renowned Brazilian writer Guimarães Rosa (1994). These texts were used as inducers so that teachers could present to the group the emotional demands of students that they experienced at school. Three 90-minute meetings were organized. This was followed by individual interviews with the teachers. A series of three guiding questions were presented during the interview:

1. How has your teaching practice changed since the COVID-19 pandemic, and what challenges do you face in your teaching in this post-pandemic period?
2. How does the knowledge of psychology, particularly that relating to human development acquired during your initial training, help you in your teaching practice?
3. How are your students faring in this post-pandemic moment, and what are their main needs during the school day?

The interviews followed a logic that enabled a contextualized comparison, i.e. an analysis that also encompassed the cultural, historical and subjective characteristics shared by the participants.

Two sets of results emerged immediately from the workshops. The first showed that reading, whether on psychological subjects or other



Matheus Batalha with his students

fields of knowledge such as literature or education, is not part of the daily life of teachers, professionals who are often overwhelmed by the demands of school and other professional activities.

It also highlights the exhaustion of teachers who, in order to survive, have to hold down two or three jobs, a phenomenon known in the scientific literature as moonlighting. Needless to say, not reading practically prevents teachers from acquiring theoretical knowledge and new pedagogical tools and strategies to deal with the phenomena they face in Brazilian schools.

On the other hand, paradoxically, the workshops also showed that there is a strong desire to read about psychology and new teaching and learning methodologies. However, this knowledge

**THE TEACHERS, IN ORDER TO SURVIVE, HAVE TO HOLD DOWN TWO OR THREE JOBS, A PHENOMENON KNOWN IN THE SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE AS MOONLIGHTING**

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**CINEMA AND MANY OTHER SOURCES HAVE REPEATEDLY SHOWN US HOW DIFFICULT IS THE TRANSITION FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD**

escapes the professional reality of teachers, as the educational state network offers no incentives for the ongoing development of these skills.

Semi-structured individual interviews showed us that this problem runs even deeper. Three analytical categories proved highly relevant. In the first, teachers emphasized the changes needed in teaching practices in the post-pandemic world. It was necessary to readapt the school's educational field to cope with the constant learning difficulties of students who had been out of school for almost two years.

The feeling they described was that, although they were motivated to do the work now, they had experienced a kind of academic progression without knowledge. However, this only scratches the surface of the problem. When asked about psychological challenges, teachers relate psychology to what they've learned in their life experience, not to the concepts and theories they've learned in their undergraduate teacher training programs. There is a clear gap between what they have learned, superficially, in their undergraduate programs, and the reality they face when they work in schools every day. Finally, paradoxically, they also found constant episodes of anxiety and depression among their students. In their view, this is the biggest challenge facing teaching and learning today.

Although they are able to identify these episodes as the result of deep-rooted psychological conflicts, strategies for dealing with these issues are outside the school's daily routine, since the inclusion of psychologists in

Sergipe's schools only began after the pandemic, due to a law that has yet to become a reality throughout Brazil. However, Sergipe's state psychologists work in administrative buildings, far from the schools, and provide help whenever and however they can. They do not provide sufficient support to teachers.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Multiple traumas affect schools, and in many parts of the world, they have intensified with the Covid-19 pandemic. Cinema and many other literary sources have repeatedly shown us how difficult the transition from adolescence to adulthood can be. However, schools remain seemingly oblivious to the possibilities that psychology offers. In the case study presented in this article, which focuses on the Brazilian experience in Itabaiana, it is expected that debate and dialogue on issues relating to students' mental health will be broadened. Schools need to create an atmosphere in which emotions can be safely discussed, giving adolescents the opportunity to express themselves and receive adequate support whenever they need it.

To this end, it is also necessary to expand professional training opportunities for teachers, so that they can receive adequate training in psychology. In Brazil, this is still a distant scenario, as Brazilian public managers have little interest in this issue. But this movement is of considerable importance both for teachers already working in schools and for pre-service teachers. It is therefore necessary to discuss the fundamental elements that constitute psychology as a

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human science relevant to teaching and learning.

We would like to thank the Foundation for the Support of Research and Technological Innovation of the State of Sergipe (Fapitec/SE) and the French magazine Cooperative Approaches for their support.

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