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Relating Adolescent Development Needs To Vocational Student Organizations

Part I

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Introduction

Just do it. This prominent advertising slogan could just as easily describe vocational education's approach to conducting its student organizations. Too little time is spent, however, discussing the rationale that underlies the need for vocational student organizations (VSO's)¹. Rather, an assumption seems to exist that anyone with reasonable intelligence knows the value of such student organizations and therefore, such discussions are unnecessary. Using this rationale, in-service programs and teacher-education courses generally move directly into the "how-to-do-it aspects" of operating (VSO's). We challenge this assumption. The purpose of this article is to encourage vocational educators to re-examine their reasons for offering and advising student organizations. The profession should take advantage of the knowledge regarding adolescent development. The theories derived from this knowledge base serve as the foundational basis upon which vocational student organizations are developed and operated. This paper focuses primarily on secondary VSO's. Given the nature of the changing population being served by postsecondary vocational education programs, adolescent development theories may not be appropriate or valid for guiding the activities in VSO's composed primarily of adults.

Technology Student Association, and Vocational Industrial Clubs of America.

Relating adolescent development theories and knowledge to VSO's can be more important than a heavy dose of "how-to-do-it" activities. Such activities don't convince instructors of the importance of student organizations. While instructors may become good technical advisors, they may not be committed to student organizations over the "long haul." Instructors really need to be sold on the need for and benefits of student organizations in order to insure that these organizations will provide real, lasting value to students. It is not that technical competence as a VSO advisor is not important. Instead, developing technical competence without a grounding in adolescent development theories is somewhat illogical.

Background of Vocational Student Organizations

A study of the history of VSO's will lead to understanding how we arrived at the current methods for the preparation and development of VSO advisors. The official history of VSO's began with the establishment of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) in 1928. According to the founders of the FFA, the organization was established to provide leadership development, opportunities for self-expression, social experiences, the development of self-confidence, and pride in a rural heritage for those students enrolled in vocational agriculture classes (Mueller, 1955). Such activities were needed because they were "missing" in the vocational agriculture curriculum (Vaughn, Vaughn, & Vaughn, 1987). There is no discussion in the literature of tying the need for this organization to any educational or human development theories. It appears that it simply

¹The generally recognized vocational student organizations are: Business Professionals of America, Distributive Education Clubs of America, Future Business Leaders of America/Phi Beta Lambda, FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America), Future Homemakers of America/Home Economics Related Occupations, health Occupations Students of America, National Postsecondary Agricultural Student Organization, National Young Farmer Educational Association,

made "good sense" to implement such an organization.

In reviewing the events that led to the development of the FFA, it should be noted that the impetus for the organization came primarily from adults. Although students were consulted to determine if they were interested in an agriculture student organization, no evidence was given that these students were asked to provide input regarding their specific needs and concerns. The FFA organization was developed based on adult perceptions (primarily agricultural educators) of student needs and interests and not necessarily on recognized adolescent development theories. It is possible that the founders of the FFA did have an intuitive grasp of the needs of adolescents, but it is difficult to ascertain if this was the case. It must also be remembered that the FFA, as well as most of the other VSO's, were implemented some years before individuals such as Erikson and Piaget presented their theories of adolescent development. Simply stated, theories that might have provided a foundational basis for VSO development were not yet in place.

Benefits Derived from Relating VSO's to Theories of Adolescent Development

There are three primary benefits that can be derived from relating VSO development and operation to adolescent development theories. These benefits are (a) opportunities for increased VSO advisor effectiveness, (b) an enhanced rationale for the importance of VSO's in vocational education programs, and (c) a model for evaluating and studying VSO's.

VSO advisors are likely to be more effective if they understand the relationship between adolescent development theories and selected VSO activities. Most vocational instructors would argue that students need to understand theory in order to function most effectively in the workplace. For example, an automotive instructor would likely say that his or her students need to understand basic hydraulic theory in order to diagnose and repair automatic transmission problems. Similarly, an agriculture instructor might state that agricultural education students need to know the theory of supply and demand in order to understand the marketing of agricultural commodities. As instructors, we know that understanding principles and theories is critical. If we accept this premise, it seems reasonable that we should apply this same type of logic to the study and advising of vocational student organizations.

A knowledge of adolescent development theories is also important from the

standpoint that it allows instructors to discuss their values and beliefs regarding vocational education and VSO's. A values and beliefs clarification process is critical because it helps instructors to understand their personal philosophies of VSO's and vocational education (and education in general). VSO advisors function most effectively when they act with the sense of conviction and purpose that an understanding of one's personal philosophy can provide.

Often, vocational educators and school administrators view VSO's as simply another extra-curricular club. Even in some very effective VSO chapters, the advisors of these organizations have encountered difficulties in convincing administrators and other instructors in the school that the VSO is meeting student needs not met elsewhere in the school or community. VSO advocates often argue the merits of VSO's based on such terms as "leadership development" or "personal development." However, these terms are somewhat ambiguous and simply don't convey all of the potential benefits of VSO's. Using the terminology presented by adolescent development theories, instructors and VSO advocates have a stronger vocabulary for articulating the value and benefits of VSO chapters. It becomes easier to relate specific VSO activities to actual adolescent needs. For example, the importance of developing a VSO program of activities is enhanced when it can be shown that this activity helps meet an important student need - namely, the need that adolescents have for developing the capability to effectively manage their own affairs.

When one considers that VSO's have been developed according to a "pragmatic" rather than "theoretical" model, it is not surprising that VSO evaluation and research efforts have been inconsistent and unfocused. The acceptance of adolescent development theories as constructs underlying VSO's could serve to remedy these problems by providing a central knowledge base for VSO research and evaluation efforts. Additionally, the adolescent development theory knowledge base provides a valuable model for teacher-education courses and in-service programs which focus on preparing and up-dating VSO advisors. Cruickshank (1990) illustrates the importance of utilizing an accepted knowledge base in teacher preparation activities. He states, "If teachers

and teacher educators are to have self-respect and the respect of other professionals including the general public, their preparation must be based on verified knowledge - knowledge that is held in high regard and that informs practice." (p. 1). The application and consideration of adolescent development theory would enhance VSO evaluation, research, and teacher-education efforts.

Human and Adolescent Development

It is important to note that within the broad construct of adolescent development, there are differing perspectives and theories regarding adolescent development. Although many researchers have examined the concept of adolescence, perhaps the most influential of these have been Freud, Erikson, and Piaget. Therefore, any knowledgeable discussion of adolescent development requires a basic understanding of their theories.

Freud

Freud (1924) believed that personality development was essentially shaped by the early experiences in one's life. His observations in working with patients led him to conclude that individuals went through five "psychosexual" stages in their lives. The significance of these stages was that each focused on the experience of pleasure in a particular part of the body (erogenous zones). Freud categorized these stages as oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. Within each of these stages, Freud theorized that an individual experienced conflict between the pleasure associated with the erogenous zone and external sources such as parental or environmental effects. Further, he believed that if the conflicts that emerged during each stage were not resolved, these conflicts would surface as problems later in one's life.

Erikson

While Freud's theories were influential, they are not as prominent today as are those proposed by Erikson and Piaget. However, Freud's theories were valuable in that they served as catalysts in stimulating others to continue the discussion of individual development. Erik Erikson contributed greatly to this continued discussion.

Like Freud's theories, Erikson's theory of personality development is psychoanalytic (based on the premise that individuals are

generally unconscious or unaware of the processes that they are undergoing). Unlike Freud, however, Erikson (1963) believed that the personality and individual development continued throughout one's life. Erikson theorized that individuals go through eight "psychosocial" stages or "ages" in their life cycle and that these stages are steps in the development of an identity. Erikson's eight stages are (a) trust versus mistrust, (b) autonomy versus shame and doubt, (c) initiative versus guilt, (d) industry versus inferiority, (e) identity versus identity confusion, (f) intimacy versus isolation, (g) generativity versus stagnation, and (h) integrity versus despair.

Piaget

Rather than using a psychoanalytical approach, Piaget viewed individual human development from a cognitive theory perspective. This perspective assumes that humans are rational, logical beings capable of using their intellects to understand and interact with the stimuli they receive from their environments. Consequently, they can create meaning from their life experiences, rather than being unaware or unconscious of the impact of these events.

Abstract thinking becomes possible during adolescence. Being very idealistic, the adolescent enjoys using logic while simultaneously imagining hypothetical situations which are often aimed at providing him or her with perfect, ideal situations or desires. These abilities and characteristics comprise what Piaget calls formal operational thought. Formal operational thought occurs in two phases - an assimilation phase in which reality is overwhelmed (early adolescence) and an accommodation phase in which intellectual balance is restored through a consolidation of formal operational thought during the middle years of adolescence (Santröck, 1990). Piaget (1972) outlined several characteristics of the formal operational thought processes and abilities of the 11-12 pre-adolescents and 14-15 year old adolescents:

1. The principle novelty of this period is the capacity to reason in terms of verbally stated hypotheses.
2. Adolescents can engage in a fruitful and constructive discussion in which they can argue for a hypothesis which they really

don't support.

3. They can understand and construct theories.
4. Adolescents can start to implement operations involving combinations and permutations.
5. They have the ability to combine propositions: therefore, propositional logic appears to be an essential conquest of formal thought.
6. Adolescents can understand and combine in one operation the negation and the reciprocal.

Piaget (1972) went on to suggest that one's aptitude, social environment and the stimulation it provides are factors that determine when the stage of formal operations is completely attained; this often occurs when the adolescent is 15-20 years old.

The theories of Freud, Erikson, and Piaget have formed the foundation for most of the recent discussion and research regarding human development. More importantly, their theories have provided frameworks that have been extremely useful in helping discover much of what we currently know about human and adolescent development. Herein lies the most important aspect of the theories posited by these three individuals; namely, the subsequent development of a base of knowledge which allows us to better understand the needs of adolescents, as well as their problems and concerns. In more practical terms, this information can be used as a basis for developing and implementing a wide range of effective and meaningful activities and programs for adolescents. Specifically, this knowledge base can be especially useful for VSO advisors because they can target VSO activities to specific adolescent needs and concerns. However, one first needs to identify key elements of the knowledge base regarding adolescent needs and concerns. These needs and concerns are specifically addressed in the next issue of The Visitor. The next issue also discusses the importance of relating adolescent needs to specific VSO activities.

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