Human development is a complex process that cannot be compartmentalised into any one domain. All are intrinsically interwoven and development in one area impacts on development in other areas.

Human development is a complicated process. Thus, an all-encompassing approach needs to be adopted when attempting to focus on domains. From childhood to adulthood, theorists have sought to provide explanations of development, aided through the use of separate domains. Although, even using theories, human development is mostly unpredictable due to an interplay of biological and environmental factors that can shape an individual. Advocating environmental factors is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of development, expressing influences that can affect an individual throughout their lifetime, starting with direct impacts in the microsystem to more external impacts in the exosystem and beyond. Key to this theory is the mesosystem, illustrating that interconnections between influences can affect an individual’s development. As with the uniqueness of experiences to an individual, the influences in each system are distinct to everyone, demonstrating the complexity of this model, and of human development.

Focusing on a Year 8 classroom, almost all students would be undergoing changes associated with puberty, including those prior to onset. Puberty is a collective term used to describe physical changes, mostly caused by a variation in the hormone secretions from the pituitary gland, resulting in the development of sex organs as well as broader changes to the bones, muscles and brain (Boyd and Bee, 2014). When thinking of puberty, one may focus on observable changes, the changing of voice pitch and growth of body hair for example, and not consider unseen wider physical changes such as those that occur in the brain. Giedd et al. (1999) suggest that, even prior to puberty, the pre-frontal cortex of the brain is undergoing alterations that lead to the pruning of inefficient synapses in the brain, prompting the development of more efficient existing connections. These changes increase risk taking, making adolescents more vulnerable to dangerous behaviours, such as experimentation with substances (Giedd, 2015). Thus, all students within a Year 8 classroom may be at increased risk of dangerous behaviours, even prior to the onset of puberty, making it a concern that educators should be aware of. In addition to this, physical alterations in the pre-frontal cortex can affect the cognitive and social domains, in the form of cognitive performance and social perception respectively (Mah, Arnold and Grafman, 2005). Due to this complex interplay of factors, the effects of which can be seen throughout a lifespan, puberty could be considered multidimensional, in accordance with Baltes (1987) theory of human development, as the maturation of the pre-frontal cortex during puberty affects other domains.
Advocating that puberty can affect life span development, Daniel and Balog (2009) suggest that early female puberty is a risk factor for physical illnesses, breast cancer for example, and has been linked to social and behaviour concerns, such as eating disorders, depression, and substance abuse. Undeniably these are complex issues that could affect any afflicted individual across domains. For example, anorexia nervosa can negatively impact emotional wellbeing (Sy et al., 2013), in addition to physical symptoms such as weight loss. The increased risk that early-maturing females experience illustrates how puberty can continue to have an impact on development throughout a lifetime, although casual links between the premature physical changes and issues in later life cannot be established. For instance, depression could be connected to social and emotional well-being, both of which can be impacted because of physical changes during puberty. Thus, a causal relationship is almost impossible to prove as puberty is multifaceted and cannot be compartmentalised.

Upon entering a Year 8 classroom, one would instantly be able to see differences in physical characteristics, height, and weight for example. Seemingly, these variances are apparent to those in the classroom, leading adolescents becoming increasingly conscious of their own bodies and how they are changing (Wilson and Wilson, 2014). Exaggerating this, asynchronous development could form the basis for interpersonal comparisons, where judgements are made due to the varying development from individual to individual (McInerney and Putwain, 2017). Considering this, adolescents may make interpersonal judgements in relation to individuals in their microsystem, such as peers and family. As with any comparison, a positive, negative, or neutral conclusion could be drawn which could affect an individual’s notion of self. In accordance with Rogers (1959), the conclusion drawn is typically regarding how congruent, or consistent, an individual’s self-image and ideal self are. If an individual’s self-image and ideal self are far apart, also known as incongruent, this could have a negative impact on self-esteem. Furthermore, Erkolahti et al. (2003) found that a greater number of depressive symptoms, such as negative mood, were exhibited in adolescents who had a negative view of their self-image. Thus, a Year 8 who perceives their self-image to be unalike their ideal self, which could be influenced by interpersonal relationships, could exhibit low self-esteem in the classroom.

Although adolescents in a Year 8 classroom may be conscious of their bodies in relation to each other, increasingly adolescents in Western societies are using social media to follow a range of individuals from peers to celebrities, whom they may idolise. Reflecting this is statistics regarding social media use, with 67% of the United Kingdom’s 9 to 16 year olds using social networking (Livingstone, Ólafsson and Staksrud, 2011). Arguably as the use of social media has grown, so has its influence. Therefore, it could be reasoned that social media forms part of a Year 8 student’s microsystem (Eaton, 2014), exerting a similar influence on self-image as peers. However, it is
believed that exposure alone does not have a negative impact on self-image, as one may first believe, more so it is engagement in the form of comparison between the individual and what they are seeing (Perloff, 2014; McLean et al. 2015). Explaining this could be social media leads to unattainable body aspirations, heightened by the use of photo manipulation amongst celebrities or peers. Thus, if an adolescent uses social media to compare themselves to individuals whose photographs are enhanced, their ideal self may become further apart from their self-image, causing lower self-esteem which could lead to greater depressive symptoms. Hence, interpersonal relationships, including social media, seem to provide some of the grounds for judgements on self-image. Thus, physical development in early adolescence can have a resounding impact on an individual emotional development in relation to self-image, thus self-esteem.

The idea that body type can influence personality characteristics, as proposed by Sheldon (1940 cited in McInerney and Putwain, 2017, p.84) provides a basis for explaining how physical development can affect social development. Whether an individual is characterised as an endomorph, mesomorph or ectomorph, certain behaviours are believed to be exhibited more depending on this. For instance, a muscular individual, known as a mesomorph, is thought to be loud and unsympathetic. The underlying notion of this is that physical appearance can influence personality. Following this, socialisation can be affected in the form of peer grouping by physical characteristics. Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that social categorisation is the first stage in becoming part of a group. This is the classification of individuals to aid understanding and identification, sometimes taking the form of observable characteristics such as body type. Once an individual has identified the group that they belong to, they may adopt the perceived norms and attitudes that are exhibited by the group, increasing the likelihood of acceptance. To do this, an individual may pay attention to the group, observing and encoding their norms and attitudes before imitating this later (Bandura, 1977). If an individual perceives the group to be similar to themselves, the probability of this increases, further supporting the idea that grouping can form based on shared characteristics such as body type. From this, comparisons, sometimes fuelled by stereotypes, occur leading to the formation of ‘in’ groups and an ‘out’ groups. Therefore, within a Year 8 classroom, it may be possible to see different peer groups due to the idea the individuals will socialise with others who are perceived as similar to themselves, possibly based on physical characteristics, which can then shape personality through the adoption of norms and attitudes.

Exploring this further, the increased risk of substance use associated with early puberty is attributed to increased socialisation with older adolescents, perhaps due to their mature physical appearance (Costello et al., 2007). This reiterates the notion that observable changes to the body in puberty could affect personality, explaining this through the adoption of norms and attitudes of an older
peer group. Alternatively, the increased risk of substance abuse could be due to the changes in the brain, increasing vulnerability to dangerous behaviours. This can have future implications with Irons et al. (2015, p.277) suggesting that if undertaken before the age of 14 ‘alcohol use and intoxication may be causally linked to increased adult alcohol and drug-related outcomes’. Again, whilst connections can be made between early alcohol use and later life addiction, a single association cannot be made between brain development and increased substance use, as other factors undoubtedly have an influence.

Contrasting the idea that physical appearance can impact on social development, Parker and Gottman (1989 cited in Beazidou and Botsoglou, 2016, p. 1617) propose that friendship to a 13-year-old has a deeper purpose than social acceptance, in the form of self-disclosure and developing an understanding of self. Thus, it could be argued that the formation of groups in a Year 8 classroom due to physical appearance is narrow and limiting, as the purpose of friendship is more complex than this. Nevertheless, puberty would seem to be one of many contributing factors that impact the formation of peer groups, affecting social development in adolescents.

Having discussed physical development in adolescence, it is impossible to do this exclusively. The domain of physical development has traversed the emotional and social domains within this essay, illustrating that domains are intrinsically interwoven, impacting upon each other during the lifespan of an individual. Thus, a holistic approach is crucial when thinking about areas of development as development cannot be compartmentalised into one domain.

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References


