ADOLESCENT EXPERIENCE:
‘IN OVER OUR HEADS’

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ABSTRACT The demands that schools place on adolescents often result in students disengaging from school, family and peers, and attempting high risk behaviours, even suicide. This paper examines the experience of one Year 11 student, using Robert Kegan’s five stages of consciousness to illustrate the complexity she is grappling with in her attempts to reach her potential, and the need for support.

Introduction

The life of adolescents can be complex, confusing and confronting especially when attempting to understand the demands made of them by parents, peers and pedagogical perpetrators in the shape of school teachers. The world that used to fit so easily into black/white, right/wrong and like/dislike is no longer so rigid in the adolescent years.

Relationships with parents and others become more complex as schools ask for increased perception, sensitivity, objectivity and consciousness, the need for which the adolescent has little awareness of. The requirements of school become less clear as staff ask the individual to be more self-directed, self-aware, disciplined and goal orientated. Adolescents have been known to disengage from school, family and peers and attempt high risk behaviours and even suicide to find their way through the maze of conflicting emotions, demands and perceptions that arise with adolescence. In this paper, I will address the experience of one adolescent girl in a Victorian school, examining her awareness of self and world issues through the theoretical perspective of Robert Kegan.

Kegan’s developmental psychology

Robert Kegan (1994), a self-named neo-Piagetian, has explored, described and examined the experience of life through the lens of developmental psychology. His five stages of development are based upon the cognitive capacity of the individual to objectify certain aspects of his or her life, experience and consciousness. It is about the organising principle we bring

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to our thinking and our feelings, and our relating to others and our relating to parts of ourselves' (Kegan, 1994, p. 29). The stages attributed to the adolescent capture the complexity of the experience and resonate with the research I have been undertaking at a Melbourne metropolitan secondary college.

Kegan (1994) has named his book 'In over our heads' which captures perfectly the experience of the student I have had the honour to research. In his title, he is not only referring to the experience of adolescents but to the experience of any individual whose cognitive capacity to objectify does not meet that of the context within which they live.

Schools are in themselves complex environments where the air is thick with contradictory messages, paradoxical paradigms and myriad relationships. The adolescent attempts to cope with 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' or just surrenders and floats like flotsam and jetsam on the daily tide of the schooling experience. Our concern is with the students who give up trying to cope with the complexity and fail to reach their potential. In order to reflect upon this situation, we need to more fully understand the world of the young person and find ways in which to theorise it.

Using Kegan's five stages of consciousness, the present-day schooling curriculum is soundly based in the fourth stage of consciousness: as it demands a cognitive capacity to think about thinking, to objectify our belief systems, to stand apart from experience, to have relationships but not to be them. From this stance students are expected to engage with work requirements, discuss a variety of points of view, predict the outcome of a plot, adopt different cognitive approaches to different subjects and plan their futures as if they were the unquestionable result of a set of logical steps emanating from an achievable and appropriate goal. These are all very worthy and valuable notions and for the student with whom I am working, all of these skills and capacities are presently impossible, unachievable and alien.

One child's experience

Rasia is a child of refugees from Iraq and arrived in Australia when she was about 11. She attended a Language Centre and learned English and now speaks it on behalf of the whole family. She speaks five languages colloquially but has not had formal training in grammar and the written word. She never attended Primary School. She has golden - brown hair and dancing green eyes and is enthusiastic, amiable, friendly and considerate. She is now 16 and in Year 11. I meet with her one-to-one for about twenty minutes once a fortnight as part of the 'Advocacy Program'. The intention of the program is to support students, some of whom are considered to be 'at risk' of being unsuccessful at school, by having a trusted adult spend one-to-one time with them so they can speak about issues that are important to them. I have met with Rasia fortnightly for one year.

As the interaction is student-centred, Rasia leads the conversation and school and relationships are the prevalent themes of our interactions. "What's new? New ideas in my head? School, school, always school, you know." Rasia has adopted the Australian schoolgirl habit of ending sentences on an upward inflection like a question and I find it always elicits a positive response from me; a useful interpersonal technique for getting instant feedback.

When she talks about school it is often about how 'hard' subjects are and how 'hard' particular careers will be but she never sees this as a barrier to her engagement in these activities. She is naively and enthusiastically unaware of how the world is constructed and of the various expectations she needs to meet to be successful in the world of school or work. Yet she tries hard and expects to do well because of that. She listens to the teacher and expects that she will learn because of that. She is a pleasant and relational person and expects that she will go to University because of all of these attributes put together.

In her world, in year 11, she is expected to choose subjects that are appropriate for her and her future pathway. This requires a knowledge of herself, what she is good at and what she imagines her future to be. She is expected to understand the requirements of the different subjects, to be able to differentiate the subject from the teacher and direct her own learning. She is expected to have and hold a point of view that is sustainable and supportable, to be able to challenge her newly acquired view of the world and the views of others. These expectations are all pervasive in the school that she attends and her school is more supportive of students than most but her understanding of these requirements is
limited. She feels overwhelmed by the demands of the teacher and the subjects and she does not differentiate between the two.

In part she copes by keeping friendly, consistent and quiet. She is eternally hopeful that either the world will change to suit her or that she will gradually increase her understanding of what is required by listening more closely to her teachers. The limitations of this worldview are addressed by Kegan.

Kegan's (1994) theorising about the stages of development, places adolescence in between stages 2 and 3 with all the accompanying increases in complexity. The students I am working with are in transition between major stages of growth and, when and if they complete the shift to stage 3, are still not comfortable in stage 4 which is where the curriculum is being delivered. The frustration that this must engender between teachers, students and the requirements of the curriculum and the school and parents is in evidence in classrooms every day.

Kegan theory of developmental stages does not just address the behavioural attributes of change or the adjustments to interpersonal interactions; he addresses the cognitive capacity of the individual and the principles by which they organise their experience and their world view.

In stage 1, the individual is within the transient world of magic and mystery where the world is unpredictable and all things are possible, where fantasy is no different from reality, where dinosaurs and fairies can appear in the backyard if we wish hard enough. Where each day is a whole new experience with no consistencies from the days before. Each day is totally new and different from the day before with no recognition of patterns or consistencies.

In stage 2 we develop an understanding that there are certain consistencies in the world and that we can construct ‘durable categories’ which have properties that are ongoing over time and space. From this the individual can develop a sense of who they tend to be and how others and things may tend to be: ‘I don’t like spinach’, ‘I am a Catholic girl’ (Kegan, 1994, p. 21). As an example of this stage, Rasia was able, after much discussion, to identify that she was ‘good at housework’ and she was a ‘good friend’. Her durable categories were reliable within her home and with her peers but were increasingly limited and limiting within the school environment.

With this stage comes the awareness that other people are not part of myself. In stage 1, the other, or more specifically Mother, was a part of the individual and was required to meet the needs, wants and interests of the child. The development into stage 2 releases the other from the need to fulfil every requirement and provides an opportunity for them to be recognised as having needs, wants and interests of their own. This stage also allows the individual to move beyond the notion of ‘moment-to-moment impulse’ (Kegan 1994, p. 23) and adopt the idea of ‘time-enduring needs or preferences’ (ibid.).

In stage 2, Rasia can understand that others think differently from her, are not there just to meet her needs, wants and interests and that they have expectations of her. She can also hold her own point of view but may find it difficult to enter into a mutual relationship with the point of view of another. As an example of this, Rasia has difficulty with her Maths teacher who is giving her Cs instead of As and Bs.

She cannot understand the perception of this teacher: ‘I don’t know, like, I can’t figure out what she wants from me, you know what I mean? I can’t figure out what she wants from me. If she wants me to do something, I will do it, I don’t mind, you know. I can’t figure out what she wants and what she doesn’t want from me, you know what I mean? If repetitious is a sign of intense feeling, then I would say she felt strongly about this issue and is powerfully engaged in trying to understand this issue. Her immediate need is to pass Maths and she feels that the teacher does not understand that need and is, in part, being deliberately obstructive. Her needs, wants and interests are being thwarted by the Maths teacher who, in Rasia’s perception, does not understand what she needs. Not only this, the teacher wants something different from her and is not clear about what she wants. The emotional and relational aspects of Rasia’s personality are the dominant informants of her response and they are overwhelmingly unhappy.

Rasia is willing to do whatever the teacher asks because it is important to her to pass Maths. She believes that all she has to do is what the teacher asks and she will pass the subject. With a ‘durable categories’ perspective, she can easily adopt the teacher’s point of view without a real sense of loss of self because the two points of view, the teacher’s and her own, are virtually interchangeable without one having more value than the next. She
can choose to do what the teacher asks or not, but she feels she needs to understand what is required of her and the teacher is not being clear. She wants the teacher to give her clear instructions to which she will respond with a certain kind of behaviour and she will pass and the world will be manageable.

For Rasia to successfully negotiate the minefield of teacher and curriculum expectations, she is required to exhibit more than slavish acceptance of durable categories. Her teachers, parents and to a lesser extent, peers require her to develop a mutual relationship between durable categories and this approach Kegan calls stage 3 cross-categorical knowing.

In stage 3, Rasia will develop different organising principles, of which durable categories will be a part. Her Maths teacher requires Rasia to think reflectively and be able to observe her behaviour, meditate upon it and adapt her behaviour and her knowing to incorporate more appropriate ways of responding to the difficulty she has with Maths. She is requiring that Rasia develop more abstract processing with the capacity to synthesise information and knowledge into a workable system. Rasia is required to develop the capacity to think of herself 'in relation to' a category rather than as the category itself (Kegan, 1994, p. 27). Rasia needs to be able to form a relationship with the understanding of her teacher and her own understanding of the situation and dialogue with it to form a new and more appropriate response which is more useful to her and her worldview in facing the expectations of the world.

The school is encouraging Rasia to choose her Year 12 subjects with her future career in mind. She has little concept of what this can possibly be and, as a result, is feeling, by her own words, stressed. She talks with me about her career and we discuss various options in depth yet two weeks later she explores the same territory again and I don't think either of us has any sense that she is any more committed to the career than before; she has done no research, no work experience and does not process any information in a manner that indicates that she has shifted from stage 2 to 3. She seems to feel that by talking about it or being stressed about it she will move closer to understanding what is required of her or what she will really like doing in the future. She cannot stand apart from her categories about herself and view her ideas in an objective way.

I do not sense that Rasia was in any way fundamentally different from the other five students with whom I have been meeting in the Advocacy Program. There has been one major shift that I did notice during our time together. In the beginning she was barely able to make statements about herself, much less those that could inform her future vision. After a few months of one-to-one sessions with her, I noticed a change in the way she was talking about her subjects and her future. She was able to make comments such as:

I'm not looking at Physics now. I can see myself, I'm not into Physics. I'm not good at it. I don't know, I look at the questions and I want to do it and I can't do it. Hard. I can't do it, seriously, you know what I mean? I can't do it. To me, I find it hard. I don't think I'm into Science stuff. I like it, I really like it but I don't think I'm good at it. You know what I mean?

This passage of reflection was a change for her in that she could separate what she liked from what she was good at. Prior to this she appeared to believe that if she liked it she would be good at it, especially if she tried hard at understanding it. Throughout this whole process, I believe that Rasia always worked to the best of her ability and understanding. I did not see her as deficient or disabled or manipulating. She did not share a common vision with her teachers and this frustrated her but she was trying her hardest to succeed and to plan for her future.

One of the major issues causing Rasia stress in her schooling was the notion that she needed to choose a career path now. Kegan is aware that this idea of future is problematic to young people who are in stage 2:

The very idea of the future as something one lives with as real in the present rather than as present-that-hasn't-happened-yet requires the same cross-categorical emanation from actual/factual/present reality (Kegan, 1994, p. 27).

None of the students I spoke with in the Advocacy Program had any real sense of their future as something that they could really plan or that had anything to do with them. To them it was an arbitrary choice rather than one that grew from the essence of each of them as individual persons. With stage 2 awareness, the challenge confronting them in school is immense and can be quite distressing. The issues associated with this are major and it is one of the reasons the Advocacy Program was conceived and established in schools.
The need for support

Kegan's (1994) theory of stage 3 cross-categorical knowing embraces and encompasses abstractness, ideals, values, mutual relationships, inner states and reflective emotions in the areas of cognitive, sociocognitive and intrapersonal-affective domains (p. 28).

From Kegan's theory and the experiences of adolescents that I have shared, it is evident that young people need support to bridge the complex space between stage 2 and stage 3 so that they do not fall through the cracks and disengage from school. It is also evident that schools, by concentrating on curriculum and policy considerations; are not meeting the needs of students who are attempting to undertake the shift.

In all of our discussions, the most important consideration for Rasia was always relationship: her relationship to teachers, friends, peers and boyfriends. The relationships with her teachers were the most powerful and influential and her confusion surrounding the Maths teacher was palpable. I sensed that she was genuinely hurt by the fact that the Maths teacher was not friendly towards her when she was trying so hard and being amiable. When I spoke to the Maths teacher, with Rasia's permission, the statements she made were all about Rasia wanting more help than the other students. She wanted Rasia to be an independent and motivated student who could engage in the subject in an active way and be able to talk about the process of her learning and deeply reflect on Maths as a 'way of thinking'. Instead she perceived Rasia and her friends as trying to get away with the teacher doing all of her work because she kept asking questions when she didn't understand. There is such a huge gap in how these two people are communicating and relating to each other and the subject.

If we consider how we can address these issues in schools, we can easily become overwhelmed by the impossibility of the task. The Advocacy Program, with its one-to-one sessions, is intended to give young people an opportunity to speak with a trusted adult about issues that are important for them and to become aware of their ways of seeing the world. In this time, they can also reflect upon their attitudes and strategies whilst with an adult who can be supportive and student-centred. Much research indicates that relationship is extremely important to adolescents and Kegan would support this whilst recognising that relationships are different in each stage of development.

It is through relationship with each other that people can move towards a common understanding. Too often in schools, the teacher/student relationship becomes mediated through the task of Maths, which then becomes the priority, and the integrity of person to person relationship becomes lost. The Advocacy Program allows schools to value relationship and give young people and teachers an opportunity to prioritise each other and then move towards achievement in a task by working together towards a common goal that has been negotiated. In Kegan's terms, until we listen to young people and recognise that they are 'in over their heads' we cannot achieve the learning outcomes that we desire and will continue to have frustrated and disengaged youth.

References