EDUC 6785 Assignment 2
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Belonging in Schools and Teaching for Equity

Task Scenario Two: Socio-economics and School Completion

Introduction

This essay will examine the relationship between socioeconomic factors and school completion, using the scenario of Kevin, a fifteen year old attending year 10 in Keira High School in a regional Australian community. The community has experienced an economic downturn during recent years, and has far less employment opportunities for school leavers. Traditionally, the area has had opportunities for manufacturing apprenticeships, which have been accessed by other members of Kevin's family. Kevin cannot leave school before he turns 17 (a legal requirement others in his family have not faced) and believes this is both unfair and at odds with his future. The lack of opportunity and possibilities for the future has left Kevin frustrated in his schooling. As a result, he has become increasingly disruptive by acting out in class, and displays aggression toward his teachers.

This essay will locate Kevin's situation in a framework of educational psychology and evidence-based pedagogical strategies. It will attempt to understand Kevin's learning difficulties through education related theories, including Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Piaget's stages of cognitive development, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. It will examine how Kevin's learning experiences are possibly being undermined because of not taking account of best ways to respond to his memory capacity, motivation, and cognitive load. It will outline some strategies that his school could use to alleviate the situation, including Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), an emphasis on vocational related curriculum content, and the use of scaffolded teaching techniques.

1. Addressing Kevin's underlying the socioeconomic context

Before examining Kevin's cognitive development in the context of his learning or the adequacy of the school curriculum, it is essential to look at the broader ecological context that is shaping his educational experience. To do this, I will locate Kevin's situation within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019), which affords a wide view from which to ascertain the challenges of Kevin's situation. Bronfenbrenner situates the individual within nested environmental layers, which range from immediate environments, such as Kevin's family and school (defined as 'microsystems') to more broader socio-cultural contexts (called 'macrosystems') (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The opportunities within Kevin's microsystem (i.e. the ability to seek work in the way his father did) have clearly contracted, and his school no longer functions as a pathway that can lead toward opportunities he considers viable. Kevin's 'mesosystem' (how Bronfenbrenner defines the interrelationships between microsystems) has become ineffective and unrelated to his perception of a meaningful future. This has also caused Kevin to dislike his teachers, as they are exist as part of a mesosystem that is not functioning in a way that can provide any immediate or future benefit.

When examining Kevin's 'exosystem' (how Bronfenbrenner describes the wider economic market conditions), things become markedly worse. Here, Kevin's situation is certainly not unique - the deindustrialisation of regional areas in Australia has resulted in limited apprenticeships and vocational opportunities. Because of this, many rural and regional communities in Australia are currently facing systemic educational inequalities due to economic decline, which has had a direct affect on youth aspirations and engagement (Roberts and Green (2013). This issue is also reflected in more national patterns, where the rates of school completion are lower in many parts

of regional Australia, with rural and low-SES communities in particular experiencing lower rates of completion (Mitchell Institute, 2023). While being an issue that needs to be addressed by the school, it also points to wider issues - the problematic nature of educational policies which seek to mandate school attendance without having a clear strategy to address the changing macrosystem needs.

All of this suggests that before dealing with any specific concerns related to Kevin's cognitive development or underlying motivation, broader structural conditions may need to be addressed. As Teese (2015) notes, the Australian education system routinely fails one in four young people—particularly those from low-income or regional backgrounds, and this shows a systemic bias toward more advantaged students. The issues of regional disadvantage, limited vocational pathways, and a declining local economy are central to Kevin's disengagement. Beyond any curriculum related response, there is a wider crisis that appears to require a policy response, which needs to acknowledge and respond to the structural inequities that exist in Kevin's community. As Windle (2008) notes, educational institutions can sometimes obscure or legitimise these inequalities by conflating systemic barriers to issues around individual student behaviours or aptitude. This could result in the school interpreting disengagement as a behavioural issue, rather than recognising it as a rational response to a system that no longer works. If this is not addressed, any action the school takes with regard to either curriculum or behaviour management may be ineffective.

2. Understanding Kevin's Adolescent development

Regardless of the wider societal concerns, responding adequately to Kevin's challenges will also mean gaining a deeper understanding of his cognitive development. There are different ways from which to form this understanding. Piaget's theory would suggest that Kevin, as a fifteen year old, is coming into his formal operational stage, which is characterised by his growing capacity for abstract reasoning, hypothesis testing, and higher level problem solving (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019). By this age, Kevin should be ready to engage in higher-order thinking as well as metacognitive tasks. Yet his behaviour in class suggests that he is not accessing these capacities.

Although Piaget's theory has heavily influenced developmental psychology, it has also been criticised for being be overly rigid in its stage-based assumptions (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019) and runs the risk of not adequately taking into account the wider context, which is critical in this scenario. Given what we know about Kevin's situation, it is likely that the perception of his cognitive growth may not be simply a matter of his age or biological development. Rather, it is being affected by complex social, emotional, and cultural factors.

An alternative view to take of the situation would be to utilise Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which can offer a more context-aware and flexible understanding of Kevin's development. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or the the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with appropriate support, emphasises the interplay between social interaction and guided learning experiences (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019). We can use Vygotsky's theory to inform strategies that offer more targeted scaffolding, which could be through teacher modelling, peer collaboration, or mentoring. Vygotsky's theory is powerful in that it invites Kevin's teachers to view him as someone who is not developmentally deficient, but a learner whose potential is yet to be unlocked through targeted support. Identifying his ZPD and building learning experiences aligned to his current capabilities could allow for his growth and help address his sense of frustration and withdrawal.

As well as cognitive development theories of psychology, the psychosocial theory developed by Erik Erikson's provides a powerful framework from which to understand Kevin's challenges. Erickson notes that, when in adolescence, the mind is undergoing a critical stage in the process of 'identity versus role confusion'. At this time, individuals are seeking to form a coherent sense of self, asserting this to others, and finding ways to integrate this sense of identity into their wider environment (Erikson, 1968). The collapse of traditional pathways (such as manufacturing apprenticeships) has disrupted the environmental scaffold that young people in communities like this have relied upon in the past, which has in turn informed an undermined social identity and status amongst their peers (Roberts & Green, 2013; Windle, 2008). This identity disruption is also

compounded by the stratification of educational outcomes in Australia, where the system provides privilege to students from high socioeconomic backgrounds and leaving others at risk of being marginalised (Teese, 2015). Without access to a meaningful place in his community. Kevin is not only disengaged, but may be undergoing a crisis of identity. In this sense, Kevin's disruptive behaviour and withdrawal might be seen as symptomatic of this psychosocial struggle, in an environment where there are no longer clear models of identity.

3. Addressing issues in cognitive load capacity

To properly address Kevin's needs, it is also necessary to examine issues related to his cognitive load and working memory, both of which play a critical part in effective learning. Working Memory is the part of the brain responsible for holding and manipulating information in the short term. This type of memory has limited capacity, especially when learners are facing unfamiliar or complex tasks (Lodge, Hansen, & Cottrell, 2021). Overwhelming the capacity of working memory, by providing too much instructional content can negatively affect students like Kevin, and this may be an additional factor in him becoming disengaged or frustrated.

Cognitive Load Theory (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019) can provide a useful framework with which to understand this challenge. It distinguishes between intrinsic load (the complexity inherent in the task), extraneous load (caused by the way the information is presented), and germane load (the cognitive effort involved in learning). In order to support disengaged learners, reducing extraneous information becomes important. Strategies to do this include breaking tasks into smaller steps, simplifying language, and using step-by-step examples to make it easier for learners (Sweller & Cooper, 1985, as cited in Deans for Impact, 2015). This can be combined with the idea of dual coding, a strategy which combines visuals and verbal explanations (essentially accessing multiple cognitive channels), to assist with comprehension and reduce load on working memory (Paivio, 1986, as cited in Deans for Impact, 2015). In the case of Kevin, such strategies to address this might include visual scaffolds for academic vocabulary, simplified procedural models for writing or problem-solving, or the use of visual approaches such as mind maps.

Optimal management of cognitive load can also be enhanced by the strategy of retrieval practice. This is the idea of encouraging students to periodically recall previously learned content through non-assessment style quizzes, to help strengthen long-term memory and even reveal knowledge gaps that can serve to inform targeted teaching (Roediger & Butler, 2011, as cited in Deans for Impact, 2015). These strategies can be combined with with Martin's (2023) Load Reduction Instruction (LRI), which places an emphasis on simplifying any new material, providing scaffolded support, and finding ways to include repeated practice. The aim is not to simplify the content being learnt, rather it is to help regulate the cognitive demands on working memory and build knowledge confidence gradually.

The strategies employed in these types of approaches can be also be related back to the Vygotsky's theory outlined earlier. Learning is happening though scaffolded support within the ZPD (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019). Scaffolding that takes into account cognitive load can allow learners to access more complex ideas they might manage independently, and supports can be gradually be removed as their skills develop. These types of strategies could be powerful in supporting Kevin's growth not just in an academic sense, but also motivationally, to allow him to see evidence of his growing competence and progress.

Just as load reduction strategies can help Kevin, so too will load-sensitive instruction also contribute to emotional well-being, where the teacher has a strong sense of how much load is too much. Getting this right can be critical to student success. Students who routinely experience cognitive overload can internalise failure as a personal trait, and may further disengage from the learning process (Deans for Impact, 2015; Martin, 2023). This is particularly important for students like Kevin who are already struggling.

4. Understanding underlying social-emotional factors

To address Kevin's aggressive behaviour in the classroom, it is also important to understand the social-emotional dimension of his learning and how this may be negatively affecting him. Kevin's

behaviour highlights the critical role (and failure) of social-emotional development strategies in supporting effective learning. Duchesne (2019) notes that social, emotional, and moral competencies are deeply interconnected and foundational to positive educational experiences. If students can be taught how to effectively emotionally regulate, show empathy to others, and exhibit cooperative skills through structured social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, they will be more likely to experience a sense of belonging and psychological safety within the school environment (Duchesne, 2019). This is particularly important for Kevin, whose aggressive behaviour may reflect his underlying frustration or unmet emotional needs stemming from uncertainty about his future.

Kevin's lack of motivation can also be framed in the context of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, as cited in Duchesne, 2019). This theory frames his engagement as dependent on the fulfilment of three core psychological needs - autonomy, competence, and relatedness. That Kevin's routinely displays a resistance to authority, low participation, and has behavioural outbursts suggest a deficit in all three domains. It is possible that he feels a lack of control over his learning (has little autonomy), doubts his ability (competence) to succeed academically, and feels disconnected from both teachers and peers. Any intervention will need to address these these psychological drivers in order to create better outcomes.

5. Providing strategies to reengage Kevin with his schooling

In order to reengage Kevin, the school could implement a number of curriculum related initiatives. Central to all of them will be embedding effective Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) techniques, which can specifically address social-emotional development and student motivation. This will help equip Kevin with further skills in managing his emotional regulation, empathy, resilience, and cooperative behaviour, all critical for addressing his aggressive behaviour that are related to his sense of frustration and uncertainty about his future (Duchesne, 2019; Goleman, 1995). As the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2020) program highlights, students immersed in SEL-rich environments tend to demonstrate improved academic outcomes, better behaviours, and have an enhanced sense of well-being.

It will be also be important to take steps to restore Kevin's intrinsic motivation, by incorporating learning models based on Self-Determination Theory. This will prioritise Kevin's sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The curriculum should be flexible enough to offer meaningful learning choices that have tasks which have been broken down into achievable, scaffolded challenges. This could be achieved by allowing Kevin to do projects more closely connected to his interests. This approach will become further strengthened when combined with using formative feedback to highlight progress and effort (Martin, 2023; Sharp et al., 2021).

Given that Kevin is hoping to obtain an apprenticeship, the curriculum could also be more tailored towards this interest. Content relevance has been shown to be a critical factor in student engagement, especially for those who struggle with with traditional academic pathways (Munns, 2007). Vocationally focused learning could be integrated into the core curriculum. As an example this, his mathematics study could include tasks related to the estimating and budgeting of manufacturing-related problems. These types of inquiry based and project based learning strategies could even further help Kevin's engagement by encouraging him to explore more problems relevant to his wider community. This approach also aligns well with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises the importance of meaningful social contexts and scaffolded learning in promoting cognitive development (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019).

To further allow for more meaningful content, the assessments used in the curriculum could have a greater emphasis on performance-based tasks, perhaps designing prototypes, or completing tasks more related manufacturing logistics, to allow Kevin to demonstrate mastery aligned with his interests. Here, adoption of a more differentiated assessment approach could ensure Kevin could be more recognised for his skills in critical thinking, creativity, and his practical application of knowledge, rather than being penalised for getting the wrong answer related to content that has little relevance for him. Given the issues being faced in Kevin's wider community, the changed curriculum approach could also seek to actively build strong school-community partnerships. This

could include mentorship programs connecting students with local tradespeople (to fill the void left by the lack of apprenticeships) or involve alumni from related backgrounds in the school, to help Kevin see vocational possibilities he may not have considered.

Taken together, these strategies demonstrate that engagement is not simply about remediating students who are not performing in the existing system. Rather, the curriculum should be redesigned to change the educational context in order to recognise and support Kevin's strengths and interests, with a view to providing him with a renewed sense of purpose and a hopeful vision for his future.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Kevin in his community highlight the issues being faced by students in many other Australian regional communities. They are challenges that extend beyond issues of managing individual behaviour and are intimately connected with systemic socio-economic problems. This essay has tried to highlight that Kevin's disengagement should not be regarded as a personal failing, but as a predictable outcome of an education system that, as Teese (2015) notes, can fail disadvantaged students while unfairly supporting those from wealthier backgrounds. Understanding this in the context of educational psychology and cognitive theory is critical to forming a comprehensive view of the multiple factors that are influencing Kevin's learning. An effective response from the school requires integrating scaffolded instruction techniques, planning for effective cognitive load management of students, emphasising the importance of social-emotional learning, and embedding vocationally relevant content into the curriculum.

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