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Adolescents, Egocentrism, and Mortality

Jennie L. Hanna

MacArthur High School, Lawton, Oklahoma, USA; University of Oklahoma, Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum, Norman, Oklahoma, USA

ABSTRACT

Adolescents are often described as egocentric, but a major source of this external behavior is the internal fear of adolescents have about feeling invisible, being different, and even their own mortality. Facing this fear through a curricular focus on death can help to combat this behavior. This can be accomplished through novel studies of books that include an honest discussion of death as a part of life and writing activities like composing self-obituaries. When used correctly, the subject of death can help students to develop goal-setting habits, better understand themselves and learn how to focus on the life that lies before them.

KEYWORDS

Adolescents; motivation; engagement; literacy; writing; student behavior

Piaget's theory of intellectual growth states that egocentrism, the self-centered restriction of understanding shaded by individual perception, is a natural characteristic of behavior for children in all stages of their development (Elkind 1967; Schwartz, Maynard, and Uzelac 2008). As youth transition from childhood to adolescence, their metacognitive ability is more fine-tuned so that they not only understand and recognize their own thoughts, but also are cognizant of the thoughts of others. Yet, because this understanding is colored by individual perception—which is focused upon the self now more than ever—adolescents assume that others are just as obsessed with their individual behavior and appearance as they are. This understanding can lead teens to feel as though they are always thrust before what Elkind (1967) coined as an *imaginary audience*, which results in feeling as though everyone, an ever-present audience, is watching them. These feelings of being judged can explain why teens can be self-critical one minute and self-admiring the next.

Complementing the imaginary audience is the way in which their need to perform can inflate a sense of importance to the point that it develops into a *personal fable*, a fictional story based upon individual beliefs of uniqueness and immortality. This fable is seen in teenagers as they pontificate that no one understands them, and they falsely assume that they are the only person to have ever had a certain experience or felt a

specific emotion. Furthermore, it is a fine line between believing in your own personal fable and developing elements of narcissism. While egotistical youth can understand other points of view, narcissists could care less. Most educators recognize that this personal fable as a coping mechanism and help students to avoid stepping into narcissistic behaviors.

Often in-school narcissistic behaviors are external reactions to stressful feelings of fear and failure hidden behind every exam and social interaction. Because fear can be worse than experiencing the failure itself, many adolescents mask their true emotions behind sarcasm, indifference, and vanity. Brown (2012) suggests that one way to overcome youthful narcissism is to look at it through the lens of vulnerability. Often self-absorbed behaviors seek to mask anxiety. In a social media-driven world, being average is simply unacceptable, so applying “grandiosity, entitlement, and admiration-seeking [behaviors can] feel like just the balm [needed] to soothe the ache of being too ordinary and inadequate” (28). So if students are not actually narcissists but behaving in a way to mask their distress it is possible to engage them and help them to make connections with the world (Crappell 2013).

Egocentrism in adolescents tends to fade as youths approach the age of 15 or 16 when they are able to better differentiate their own thoughts and feelings with that of others (Elkind 1967). As such, adolescents

begin to see themselves in a more realistic light and trade their imaginary audience in for a real one. However, Schwartz, Maynard, and Uzelac (2008) revisited Elkind's theories 40 years later and found that egocentrism might actually continue in later adolescence and can reemerge as an individual encounters new environments. For example, undergraduates might once again feel as though they are placed before an imaginary audience as they head off to college or newly graduated adults might develop their own personal fable when they encounter difficulties in the workplace. These findings suggest that elements of egocentrism are part of a recursive cycle capable of reoccurring throughout life.

Using death to breathe life into the classroom

With the personal fable, one of the most prevalent admiring audience constructs is that of death, due to the belief that individual uniqueness can lead adolescents to not only think of themselves as immortal, but also to develop a preoccupation with how others will react to their demise. In other words, *what would people think about me if I died?* As such, the subject of death has a natural place within the curriculum, especially in English.

Death, along with other dark topics like mental illness, abuse, divorce, racism, addiction and even suicide, are often staples in the novels and stories read and studied in a secondary English classroom (Hoffman 1994). Despite their gloominess, these topics can be uplifting when presented as testaments to overcoming adversity. Since these novels contain issues that mirror the lives of students, presenting them as a part of the curriculum signals to students that their "deepest emotions and life dramas [have] a place in the classroom" (16). Moreover, since children learn early about the mortality of self (Ulin 1980; Moore 1989), shielding them from a discussion of death does nothing to assuage the distress that come from its inevitability. In fact, trying to protect a child from discussing death can do harm, because they will be unable to have the tools to mitigate the effects once they encounter death.

Any teacher that wants to read, write, and discuss real experiences in life would be hard pressed to avoid to concept of death (Ulin 1980). If English classrooms are designed to be emotionally honest spaces (Hanna 2014) where self-reflection and personal growth are to take place, educators should not only allow for the

inclusion of difficult topics like death, they should purposefully thrust them into the limelight. In other words, "the death-free classroom, in effect, would be [a] life-free classroom" (Ulin 1980, 162).

In books such as *Tuesday with Morrie* (Albom 2002) and *The Fault in Our Stars* (Green 2012), death is not just something that happens to a character in the story, but a purposeful part of the plot. The two protagonists in Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* found that unlike the personal fable, it was not what others thought about them after their death that they were concerned with, but what they thought of themselves and each other in the time they lived. Likewise, in the nonfiction memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the main character is dying from ALS and the story revolves his sharing of personal thoughts on life including how to die. Death, according to Morrie, is the great equalizer where people learn finally how to care for one another. Reading these two books has helped my students write about their hopes and dreams at a level I had never seen. The two novels both offer lessons on how to cope with loss and the unfortunate darker elements of life (Hoffman 1994).

Another lesson that can help adolescents overcome egocentrism is writing personal obituaries. I have used obituary writing in *Tuesdays with Morrie* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1991), but also as a stand-alone reflective activity. Obituary writing acknowledges that death is a part of life and that understanding it makes them more human (Ulin 1980). The writing assignment often reveals insight into the dreams, hopes, imagination, and background of students (Corey 1972). The names of the students have been changed to protect their identities. One student, Alicia, came to my class late in the school year, but it was not until I read her obituary that I realized why:

Alicia was born on July 30, 1998, in Puerto Rico. When she was 16 years old she moved to Oklahoma due to her loss of her parents. No matter what happened she kept her head up high. She was a very compassionate and creative person. She would always have a smile on her face.

After Alicia revealed her personal history in her obituary, she found another person in the class who had also lost a parent and they became friends. If it had not been for this assignment, I might not have known this detail about her history and the tremendous effect it could have on her in the classroom.

Self-obituary writing can help students to envision a life they hope to have in the future (LaBelle 1987). Giving students time to contemplate what their lives

might look like over several decades, allows them time to think about their current direction. If students are asked about what they want to accomplish in life, how they want to be remembered, and what they want to earn for themselves in the future, it can begin to form a path. This was a lesson that several of my students took to heart. They may have goals but they did not have a clue of how to get there. For example, when Grace thought about what she wanted to do, she knew she wanted to cook because “it’s the thing I admire most in my mother,” so that mindset colored most of her newly set life plans and dreams:

Ever since she was little, she knew what and who she loved. Her mother once told her that she could do anything she wanted, as long as she put her heart into it. Grace strived to live by this advice. She went on to create a restaurant in Farmington Hills, Michigan at the age of 27. The restaurant was named “Fall in Autumn” and she worked alongside her mother and her little sister. Grace will be the everlasting warmth in everyone’s heart. She will be most remembered for her excellent sewing, cooking, and baking skills. Her oldest daughter remembers her mother standing by the stove and “watching her mother’s eyes light up as she watched others indulge into her creations, her masterpieces.” She leaves behind her restaurant to her family, keeping the tradition of a family business.

For Grace, becoming a chef of her own restaurant may have been what she wanted to be when she grew up, but with some more prodding, she realized what she really wanted to be was to be remembered in the same way as her mother. Each student was required to include a quote in their obituary they imagined being said at their funeral, and Grace’s quote revealed her desire to please others.

Parameters and possibilities

Another benefit of obituary writing is that it can help students develop their own goal-setting skills. Wiesman (2012) states student-developed goals are the best motivator and have a “positive correlation with persistence, effort, and higher levels of self-regulated learning” in adolescents (106). Travis had some lofty ambitions he hoped to achieve in his obituary:

After college, Travis got an offer from NASA to start a new space program. After being there for only two years he found out the secret behind space travel. Travis created the first ship that could travel faster than the speed of light. After about 12 years into NASA, Travis created his

own company which we all know now ... Through Travis company, FutureTECH, we can do many things that were not possible 51 years ago.

For Travis, this exercise helped him realize that to achieve the things he stated in his obituary, he needed to adjust his course schedule and decided to take additional science and math classes. Both Stern (2005) and Wiesman (2012) suggest teachers have a profound impact and influence on students. They need to help them understand the necessity of goal setting and develop the ability to persevere through the setbacks.

A word of advice for teachers planning to use self-obituaries: in addition to thinking about what their personal life, career, and accomplishments will look like in the future, I set my own parameters that the student must live to at least 80 years old. I found teenagers could get stuck on their own narcissism and have trouble envisioning a life beyond their immediate path. Forcing them to think about what they could accomplish in a full, long life helps them to set goals and think about their future.

It is important teachers are well prepared to teach this topic (Ulin 1980; LaBelle 1987; Hoffman 1994). The nature of death can elicit strong emotions from students, especially if they endure the death of loved one, so teachers must be patient when discussing or reading about death since it affects students in different ways (Ulin 1980). Teachers might forewarn students prior to the lesson or unit, and, in some cases, parents or community depending on what will be in the best interest of the youth. In addition, teachers should only include this topic if they already have a strong foundational understanding of their students (Moore 1989). This is why I have always taught *Tuesdays with Morrie* and presented the self-obituary lessons during the second quarter of my English classes. This way I can anticipate the needs of the individual students and help them prepare to approach the subject matter with compassion, maturity, and openness.

The most important part of preparing to read or discuss death is for educators to be comfortable with the subject themselves. The only thing teachers are truly in control of is themselves and the way they approach teaching. As such, they should model overcoming fear by letting down their guard and sharing their own fears (Crappell 2013; Palmer 2007). If the teacher is hesitant, those feelings of apprehension and embarrassment may be mirrored by students and create an uncomfortable

scenario for all (Moore 1989). Palmer (2007) states that when a teacher's fear is mixed in with fear on the part of the students, education can be paralyzed. While some believe showing vulnerability will cause teachers to lose authority, openness reminds students that teachers are human too and can create stronger student–teacher relationships.

I recently had an opportunity to put the concept of anticipating student needs to the test when it comes to dealing with the subject of death. This year, I taught three sections of high school drama in addition to my three classes of sophomore English. Since I found success in using my self-obituary lesson within the English classroom, I thought it would work well in the drama classes as a speech writing and oral delivery exercise.

While it was initially met with some resistance—“why do we have to write about such a depressing topic?”—they eventually began to see for what it was—a goal-setting activity that gave students an opportunity to share what they wanted for themselves in the future. I watched as students from a wide variety of backgrounds and academic abilities began to map out their hopes and dreams, resulting in funny, serious, and almost always insightful obituaries.

Tragically, the night before we were set to read our obituaries in front of the class, a well-known student took his own life. I came to school that morning unsure of how I was going to approach not only the subject of the loss of one of our own, but the obituary lesson itself. I began each class by addressing the loss and allowing students the opportunity to opt out of reading the obituary. A few students opted out, but, overwhelmingly, many students felt compelled to share because they wanted to focus on the power of life in the face of such a tremendous loss. In fact, one brave student, who was very close with the young man who passed, suggested that writing an obituary might have actually helped to remind her friend of his aspirations and goals and let him know that he was not alone in the world. Everyone has dreams, demons, and disappointments.

Once I realized that adolescent narcissism is often just a smokescreen to hide insecurity and the fear of being seen as ordinary, my perception of adolescent behavior was transformed. Pondering the fragility of

life has a way of lifting the clouds, allowing the “real selves” of students to emerge. Some educators might be leery of having a real discussion of death in the classroom, but if one of the goals of education is to prepare adolescents for the world beyond the classroom, then the topic is essential. The inevitability of death is a useful way to get adolescents to visualize the life they want and to set goals to help their dreams come to fruition.

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