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8. CONSTRUCTING AN IDENTITY

A Key to Learning

> Understanding others makes possible a better knowledge of oneself: any form of identity is complex, for individuals are defined in relation to other people – both individually and collectively – and the various groups to which they owe allegiance, in a constantly shifting pattern.
>
> (UNESCO, 1996)

From a sociocultural perspective, an individual's identity is socially constructed, forming from early childhood from their interactions and relationships with others. Through our identity we come to understand our connection "to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and … possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2000, p. 5). Our global understanding of ourselves, or our self-identity, comes as a result of a reasonably enduring combination of self-assessments (for example, awareness of physical attributes; knowledge of one's abilities/disabilities; ethnicity; spirituality) about what we consider most important about ourselves. Our identity can be thought of as a "process of becoming rather than being" (Hall, 1996, p. 4), as we renegotiate our sense of self in a dialectic and ongoing manner, through our interactions with others in our social world (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Hawkins argues that our identity is not fixed, core or unitary, rather it is an "everdeveloping repertoire of available characteristics, viewpoints, and ways of being that are both learned from and recruited through participation in discourses" (Hawkins, 2005, p. 61). The discourses that we each participate in over the course of our lives are many and varied, and our identity and sense of belonging are greatly influenced as a result. Enabling individuals to feel a sense of belonging to a community increases the opportunity for them to develop their identity (Askham, 2008). The chapters in this section all contribute to our understanding of identity as they interrogate integration and belonging, learning and engagement, pedagogical practices and educational outcomes.

THE CHAPTERS

The first chapter by Koirala explores the ways in which refugees are integrated into Australian society. He begins by defining what it means to be a refugee and outlines some of the experiences that have driven such people to seek refuge in a foreign country. The author highlights the major obstacles to the successful integration

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of refugees, citing multiple issues including the impact of the refugee's previous experiences, illiteracy, cultural or linguistic incompatibility with the host country, and the inability to form social connections and a new identity. The importance of the Australian policy environment over time is explored, noting both the influence of our 'Britishness' and our adoption of multiculturalism, and the disconnection between policies and practice.

Koirala identifies barriers to successful refugee integration. He draws attention to racism and xenophobia, particularly towards those refugees who are not 'white', and more recently, those who come from a Muslim background, as contributors to the social disconnectedness, exclusion and isolation of refugee families. In Australian society, it is not uncommon for individuals, their families and children in schools to be marginalised, and "subjected to daily messages which reinforce their separation from more powerful groups" (Jordan, 2006, p. 82). They receive regular and ongoing "destructive and disempowering messages" (p. 80) that influence their self-identity and harm their wellbeing. For refugees to integrate into their new society, cultural change or acculturation occurs. Schwartz, Montgomery and Briones (2006) identify that for international migrants, acculturation requires adaptation along two dimensions:

- *adoption* of ideals, values, and behaviours of the receiving culture, and
- *retention* of ideals, values, and beliefs from their culture of origin.

The authors argue that it is the migrant's personal identity that helps 'anchor' them during cultural transition, adaptation and finally integration into the host society.

Koirala posits that successful integration requires a two way mutual adaptation process, in which host and refugee view each other from a positive perspective. The refugees actively seek to acquire the language and culture of the host community, and members of the resident community openly embrace refugees and support their social and economic inclusion into Australian society. Research indicates that language is a key determinant of educational disadvantage in Australia (Thomas & Quinn, 2003), and it is a lack of English proficiency that Koirala highlights as an impediment to refugees' proactively participating in intercultural activities. Social inclusion and connectedness relies upon language acquisition, as language learning engages the identities of individuals because language is not only a system of symbols and signs but is also "a complex social practice through which relationships are defined, negotiated, and resisted" (Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 77). Koirala concludes his review by highlighting that developing a shared language, and hence a new identity, is key to refugees' integrating with the host culture and encourages further research in this area.

The second chapter expands upon the importance of language learning through the critique of an Early French Immersion (EFI) program in British Columbia (BC) in Canada. The authors, Hunt, Ashman and Short, explore teachers' perceptions of struggling EFI learners. This chapter begins with an exploration of

the characteristics of EFI, and the socio-cultural and political environment within which it exists. Whilst alerting the reader to the successes students may experience in EFI programs, they also highlight that learners in these programs struggle to meet expectations, irrespective of ability, learners in these programs struggle to meet expectations. They note also the significant issue of attrition rate, which for EFI programs is 60%. As the authors highlight, key problems with EFI in BC include the dearth of both French language speakers and French culture within society and, worryingly, the number of teachers in these programs who are not themselves proficient in French. This latter characteristic will impact upon both the pedagogical content knowledge these teachers can call upon when teaching in the EFI program and the socio-cultural environment and inherent pedagogies that both learners and teachers 'endure'. The authors outline the challenges young learners face in acquiring a second language (L2) in the EFI program by exploring the scholarship in this area. They highlight the fact that feelings including motivation, anxiety and self-efficacy are inseparable from learning, and stress the importance of establishing 'enduring learning patterns' in the early years. Research shows that self-efficacy, or one's beliefs about their capabilities to learn or perform at particular levels (Bandura, 1997), influences academic motivation, learning, and achievement (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995). Students with high self-efficacy, participate more, work harder, and are more resilient when they encounter difficulties, becoming successful learners who achieve at higher levels (Johnson, 2008).

The authors report upon teachers' perceptions of the key characteristics of successful and struggling EFI learners, including physical, emotional and cognitive attributes which contribute to self-identity. They acknowledge that some children learn French more easily whilst others don't like learning French at all, particularly when being forced to learn in a language that is perceived as irrelevant. The teachers are able to recognise struggling L2 learners and the data provides insight into the impact of struggling in the EFI program, on the cognitive and affective development of learners. Struggling learners experience negative feedback both in their interaction with their teachers and peers (Interpsychology) and from their reflection upon their own understanding and self-talk (Intrapsychology) (Vygotsky, 1978), impacting their identity as learners. Once a cycle of failure and low self-esteem is established, it can be difficult to reverse. In their chapter, the authors provide advice about how struggling L2 learners might be better supported, but also query the basic premise of the EFI program, and underpinning policy, as being in the best interests of young learners.

Educational disadvantage continues as a focus in the next chapter, as Brewer, examines the choices young people face in continuing into post-compulsory education in Tasmania, Australia. She begins this exploration by critiquing the literature in regards to the benefits of continuing with formal learning beyond the age of 16, concluding that there is a shared understanding in the literature that further education provides personal, regional and national advantage. Brewer believes that

the key message contained in the literature is that there is a need for young people to develop their identities as learners, enabling them to conceptualise educational participation and attainment as a life futures investment.

Student identity is complex and multidimensional and "comprises a series of interrelated, overlapping "layers", which can be organised and configured to achieve temporary coherence in different ways, depending on context and time" (Moss & Pittaway, 2013, p. 1014). Identity is shaped and reinforced, either positively or negatively, within the sociocultural environment that students interact (Henkel, 2005). There also appears to be a relationship between identity and student engagement. Solomonides and Reid (2009) perceive identity as encompassing a 'sense of being'; that is, acting with confidence, imagination and self-knowledge, and a 'sense of transformation' gained through learning, understanding and thinking. These authors suggest that a strong sense of engagement is generated when these senses of being and transformation are combined with sound pedagogic practices. Considering this relationship between student identity and student engagement is a constructive process as the latter is a strong predictor of school completion (Reschly & Christenson, 2006) and is related to academic success (Finn & Rock, 1997).

It is important to understand the Tasmanian context when considering student identity, and their participation in post-compulsory education. In her chapter Brewer unpacks the state's specific characteristics in regards to its rurality, the impact of socioeconomic status (SES) on engagement in post-compulsory education, and the importance of its educational system being responsive to emerging societal needs. The impact upon participation in years 11 and 12 in many Tasmanian schools of the inclusion of an extra transition phase from year 10 to 11 is also critiqued in Brewer's chapter. She posits that this extra transition has a greater impact upon students who are disadvantaged socioeconomically and/or who live at a distance from Tasmanian cities where the Colleges (Years 11 & 12) and most Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institutions are located. Brewer also problematizes the types of courses available to students undertaking post-compulsory education in Tasmania, with a particular focus on the predominantly academically-oriented subjects offered in Colleges, and the lack of introductory Vocational Education and Training or pre-TAFE courses, even though demand for the latter two exceed the places available. Together the requirement for transition from a familiar school environment to an unknown and new culture, and the potential incompatibility of student needs and course offerings/availability provides a barrier to student participation beyond year 10. Brewer concludes her chapter by providing the reader with some suggestions for reducing the impact of these barriers, and enabling young people to continue with their education beyond year 10. At least two of the solutions that she poses recognise the importance of teacher-student transactions in the classroom in highlighting educational relevance to the young person's identity, self-efficacy and sense of purpose.

The final chapter by Downing shifts the focus away from school education, but stays with student participation through an investigation of non-traditional

students studying at University in an online environment. In Australia, universities are moving more and more to online or blended delivery, resulting in increased participation in higher education, particularly from non-traditional students. Such student cohorts exhibit broader diversity with respect to age, cultural values, family commitments, motivations, ethnicity, SES, and educational backgrounds. They also reveal lower levels of self-efficacy which may impact upon their progression in the course, resulting in an increased withdrawal rate overall. Key to retaining such students is the curriculum (McInnes, 2001) which encompasses the totality of student experiences that occur in the educational process (Kelly, 2009), including students' relationships with staff. The 'classroom' is no longer the centre of the non-traditional, adult learning experience (Kasworm, 2005), rather it is the relationship that these learners develop with teaching staff and their peers that is considered pivotal. In light of this, Downing's chapter is significant as it both challenges our approach to teaching this new cohort of students, and provides solutions to the issues both students and teachers experience in the online teaching space through the use of pedagogical design principles.

Downing reports the findings of her research involving a group of non-traditional students enrolled in online units in a teacher education course that she both coordinates and teaches into. The aspect of her research reported here examines the characteristics and experiences of these students studying online and their perceptions of the barriers and enablers to returning to study. Downing uses design-based research (Seeto & Herrington, 2006) to explore the experiences of her online students, and utilises data generated form interview, focus groups and online artefacts (discussion board postings; assessment tasks). Downing describes the cohort as displaying several characteristics of adult learners (Knowles, 1984), particularly a desire to succeed through undertaking study that is relevant to their needs. A number of research studies (Alberici, Catarsi, Colapietro, & Loiodice, 2007; Kasworn, 2003) support this finding, as they indicate that adult learners consciously seek both personal and professional development through engaging in university study that enables them to make connections between the subject-matter being taught and its practical usefulness in their world. Yet findings from Downing's research also reveal the vulnerabilities of such students, in terms of their self-belief and resilience, and hence their self-identity and sense of belonging. Through developing a sense of self, they build their resilience (Benard, 1995) as learners, and fundamental to the development of resilient adaptation are good relationships (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003) with their peers and teachers. Although for non-traditional learners, relationships may develop outside the classroom or learning space, they still revolve around the teaching/learning process (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

Downing discusses the needs of her students evidenced from her research in such a way that informs curriculum design and pedagogical practice. For example, priorities for these students include a supportive environment which enables their engagement in meaningful and purposeful learning. The sociocultural environment

that the author describes offers an alternative to the traditional teacher-led learning environment, mirroring more closely a community of learners encompassing teacher and students. Hargreaves (1994) research aligns with Downing's position, and calls for a redefinition of teacher-student relationships, and a move "away from the teacher's traditional authority and autonomy towards new forms of relationship… becoming closer as well as more intense and collaborative, involving more explicit negotiation of roles and responsibilities" (p. 424). Teachers who develop a community of learners, sensitive to the needs of their learners as Downing describes, contribute to the transformation of their learners' identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through the words of her participants, Downing describes a learning environment which enables learners to engage in meaningful and purposeful learning, where they are "doing things together, talking, producing artifacts (e.g. helping a colleague with a problem)" (Wenger, 2003, pp. 78–79). Engaging in such an environment, enables them to develop the practices and identities that are appropriate to the community and to develop an image of themselves as successful learners.

CONCLUSION

It is through active participation (in society, education, communities) that a sense of identity and belonging develops. However not all individuals have the same ability to access opportunities, or are equally prepared (e.g. language capabilities; sociocultural background) to negotiate identity congruence. For those individuals, their self-efficacy, sense of belonging and participation in learning is impacted negatively. As Wenger (1998) has identified, learning is not just developing knowledge and practice, it also involves developing a sense of identity, coming to understand who we are and into which communities we belong and are accepted. Those learners who are not able, or not enabled, to make identity "shifts" may withdraw from the situation or community (Hughes, 2000). The authors who have contributed papers to this section have identified or foreshadowed this "withdrawal" in a number of contexts; refugees' withdrawal from the host society, and learners across the spectrum from early learners to adult learners failing to engage in learning programs. Each paper enables us to envisage the roles educators and policy makers have in contributing to a solution to the lack of engagement that the authors have identified, and key to these solutions is an understanding of the sociocultural environment.

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