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Stories of Self: tracking children's identity and wellbeing through the school years

The development of a sense of self is a central concept within social and emotional learning. For example, ideas about strengthening the self are embedded in the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme in UK schools, especially in the 'Good to be me' element. But what is a 'self'? What purpose does it serve? Do we actually experience such a thing as a self or is it more the case that we feel ourselves to be different people, several co-existing selves, in different social contexts?

Questions about identity

These questions are explored in an unusual longitudinal study, carried out with young people aged from 3 to 17. The study has recently been published by Trentham, entitled *Stories of self: tracking children's identity and wellbeing through the school years*.

Ten young people helped me in this enterprise, giving generously of their time at several points throughout their schooling. It all began when they were three years old and located in a range of pre-school settings. Initially I was interested to see how self awareness would be influenced by the increase in the number of other people that the young child interacts with as they move into the school system. I gained permission from pre-school staff and parents to observe the children, make notes, video them, carry out informal conversations and more formal 'interviews' with them and with some of the

other key people in their lives. I carried out these methods from pre-school, through the reception class and on until their third year of primary school. I collected a lot of information concerning their initial ideas about their own identity as they began to make comparisons with other children and also, as they began to realise that others were forming judgments about them too. I was interested in whether they could articulate how they had changed, and how they had perhaps stayed the same as they moved through the early years of school. There was then a long break in the study and it wasn't until the children were in year 8 of secondary school that I caught up with them again, after a gap of 7 years. The young people gave their consent for me to continue to work with them, now using mainly conversational methods but also, in order to maintain an element of fun, using time-lines, discussions of preferred photos, and the Blob People Tree (Wilson, P.) to provoke statements about self. After this stage of sequenced interviews in year 8 I then continued to arrange opportunities for conversations until the young people were aged 17.

Messages about the capacity to construct identity

One of the ways that I draw together theoretical ideas about the construction of identity is to use the contrasting metaphors of the chameleon and the snail to explain

differences between theoretical models of self. When we start to think about what purpose the 'self' serves we might answer in two different ways. We might say that the self is an untenable, illusory concept which simply cannot capture the complexities and inconsistencies of real lives. Or we might say that the self is crucial to a person's overall psychological wellbeing as it enables us to take control of our lives, and helps us to manage our experiences. These two answers are the products of diametrically opposed theories of self. The first stresses the changeability of self: identity does not exist outside of the social context in which it is constructed. It is like a chameleon that changes its colour according to its environment. The second approach stresses the continuity of self: something that the person carries about with them through time and through the range of social situations they participate in. It is like a snail's shell, carried about by the snail wherever it goes.

Children in the study

How far did the children in the study reflect this snail shell idea of consistency over time? Did they, like the young people discussed by the development psychologist Susan Harter (1999), agonise over who they 'really are', conforming to Erik Erikson's portrayal of the 'work' of adolescence as the construction of self? Or did this idea of a consistent self, building on repeated characteristics over time, simply not matter to them? I found that much depended on the opportunities they had both in school and out of school for reflecting on their social relationships, making social comparisons and building up a narrative of self.

In the book, I present the stories of Martin, Shelley, Simon, Jayne and Liam, following their lives from pre-school to the end of formal schooling, homing in on social and personal aspects of the making of identity and emphasising the educational importance of self awareness and awareness

of others. For example, through Martin's story I speculate about the origins of his value for an authentic self, an idea he voiced on several occasions especially when he felt that others saw him in a way that jarred with his own self beliefs, for example being seen as a 'Harry Potter'. Whilst with Liam I look at the influence of social class on processes of self making, concluding that school based opportunities for self reflection are crucial so that all children have access to the resources for building up a story of self.

The stories told in the book confirm Erikson's linkage of identity and wellbeing. It is at times of vulnerability, especially social vulnerability, that the need for self is activated. Simon's story yields a clear example, when he spoke of strengthening himself literally and figuratively, following a traumatic attack from a gang of older boys. The construction of self is especially necessary at times of transition, or following emotionally difficult times, for bolstering the self when it has become fragile.

My witnessing of part of these children's lives, together with sociological and psychological theories about identity, lead me to conclude that a sense of self is a resource for coping and managing our social experiences. This makes it essential that policy addresses the issue of how we can help identity along, and that we are more specific about the ways we conceptualise identity.

References

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