

Identity

Why read this text...

The concept of social identity refers to dual processes of identification, to both how individuals identify themselves and how they are identified by others. Identity is complex because people draw on many different factors in claiming or fashioning an identity. Individuals may construct an identity based on makers such as religious orientation, common history, a territory, language, occupation, surname or ethnicity (Grbić Jakopović, 2014).

Classrooms are social fields where identity matters in different ways to students, their parents and teachers. Through everyday classroom sociality, identities are constructed and contested at both personal and institutional level. Teachers and children alike identify themselves and others by drawing on categories based in nationality, ethnicity, gender, aptitude, age, diagnoses, leisure interests, neighbourhoods and behavioural patterns. The following text explores the concept of identity, how identity matters in school settings and how identities are made through classroom interaction.

Historical Context

Anthropologists have studied identity in its various forms as a process of identification and self-representation that has to do with how people understand themselves in relation to others. In the late 1960s, psychologist Erik Erikson (1968) published a work on identity in which he argued that persons may attain various identities or roles that differentiate them, from others in the group, the community or nation. Erickson's work inspired others to use the term identity for phenomena, which anthropologists until then had designated as self or personhood and had studied in relation to processes of socialization, classification, and ethnification (Erikson in Golubović 2011). Personal and collective identities are simultaneous and inseparable. Because they overlap, people can switch between them (from father to doctor) based on the situation and context at hand (Finke, Sokefeld 2018: 2).

Identities may be self-chosen or ascribed by others. Certain identities such as nationality, ethnicity, and family are often ascribed at birth. Identities are context-specific: they are built and maintained through particular forms of social interaction over a lifetime.

According to the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1993) a specific context creates its variants of identities. Giddens distinguishes between traditional inherited identities, those 'transferred' from generation to generation, and modern context-specific identities, which he sees as more dynamic and fluid. For Giddens, an identity is a symbolic construction, which people create and manipulate sometimes in ways reminiscent of traditional identities ascribed with reference to family heritage, property, place of origin, occupational or educational status.

The historian Anthony Smith uses the concept of a multidimensional identity, to discuss how an identity may refer to a cluster of categories, particular segments of which may become, more pronounced in particular times and places. In this view of identity, issues of gender, homeland, ethnicity, race, and more are interwoven and negotiated (Smith 1991).

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Contemporary anthropological understandings emphasize the dynamic and fluid nature of identity as a process, and not as an immutable construct. This was not the case back when Erikson first launched the term identity. Today meanings shift as scholars from a wide array of disciplines study identity. Anthropologists have mainly focused on collective identities, cultural, ethnic, political, religious, or gendered. Perhaps because of its fluidity and multidimensionality in practice, identity is a highly debated, contested, and contradicted concept. Still it remains an important analytical term, one that helps us understand how people fashion selves and represent who they are in relation to others, socially, culturally, and biologically (Finke, Sokefeld 2018). Anthropologists have turned their attention to how identities are invented, challenged, and sustained for political and other purposes.

a) Discussion

Human identity is not fixed, unchangeable or determined at one particular moment. Identity is an ongoing and open-ended process of becoming, from birth to death; it is built and transformed throughout a person's life (Božić Vrbanić 2008). Due to increasingly mobility, cultural contact, diffusion and intermarriage, the identities children bring to school with them and develop in school settings are changing. In school contexts, pedagogical processes and educational activities influence and contribute to the construction of personal, cultural, and national identity. As one of the countries involved in the project, we can mention the example of the Republic of Croatia, in which the national identity development is one of the four basic educational values at all levels, pre-school, general compulsory education and secondary education. Having in mind that upbringing and education should awaken, encourage, and develop a child's personal identity coupled with respect for diversity.

In his book, "Social identity" Richard Jenkins defines identity as a process of knowing, a process of knowing "who we are, and knowing who others are". Jenkins emphasises that it is also a process which implies „others knowing who we are, as well as us knowing who they think we are (Jenkins 2008). According to Ashton, identity is a process of qualifications, which for him identity implies the way in which individuals map the world around them or create their place in it, as a single person or as a member of a community (Ashton et al. 2004 according to ibid.).

Having this in mind, it is important to consider how the notion of identity is thought within groups that are formed in the school context. Belonging to a group is something we all strive for and relatively successfully achieve it in our lifetime. In the classroom context, students are part of a collective, a classroom that is created and organized through the activities of teachers, students, and the entire system that the school implies.

An individual is a part of different groups during his life, within his private and business life, as a member of the local community, nation, or as an Earthling. The groups we create, or we are part of, can be formal and informal, organized better or worse, but they are a part of our lives. In this regard, we can ask ourselves why is it important for people to belong to a certain group, and why, if they belong to a certain group, do they think that it is important for them as individuals?

Anthony Cohen developed a model of 'communal belonging', which involves understanding the need of individuals to belong both to themselves, but also to a group, a collective. Thus,



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the identity of students in the classroom can be understood as a process in which they exist or become part of a collective, a group (a process of 'being' or 'becoming').

In the classroom it is important to say, who we are, but also to say who or what we are not, as to emphasize with whom we have things in common. How to achieve this? An excellent example are personal names or surnames, which can be viewed as one of the markers of identity, family affiliation, belonging to a kinship network. In this sense, getting nicknames at school also becomes an important part of a person's identity that can be maintained throughout life or at least throughout the adolescence. In this regard we can mention Jenkins who writes that a personal name signifies individual distinctiveness, as it also positions its bearer in terms of collective similarities (and, of course, differences) (Jenkins 2008: 21).

a) Practical example

Based on ethnographic research in a racially mixed high school in urban USA, Sarah Jewett (2006) describes the different ways students construct social identity. Drawing on the perspectives of administrators, teachers, and their families, she discusses the ways they simultaneously participate in processes of constructing 'school identities'. Using ethnographic vignettes, Jewett reflects on the notion of race, and the ways it is negotiated in the context of 'mixed' classrooms. In talks with teachers, Jewett noticed that they encourage students to think about their racial identity in different contexts, in and outside of the classroom. Teachers felt that connecting to their 'cultural roots' and family heritage and finding a safety zone, a niche within the school helps students develop their own racial identity and show understanding for the identity of their classmates. To facilitate this process, teachers designed a particular story-sharing task. They had students gather and share data on topics such as housing, religion, clothing, and language to form a database available to everyone in the class. The idea behind the project was "to get students to see their similarities rather than differences in their preferences" (ibid.) and to cross the stereotypes they might have had about their classmates.

In the article, "Smart, Smarter, Smartest: Competition and Linked Identities in a Danish School", Ulla Lundqvist (2019) discusses the formation of social identity through academic success and how this is tied to identity formation among classmates. Lundqvist, argues that that conceptions of being smart, intelligent or a genius entails are social constructions and put into practice in the schools on an everyday basis (Lundqvist 2019: 1). Drawing on her ethnographic research, Lindquist portrays the stories of Iman (Iraqi background) and Mohsen (Lebanese background), two pupils enrolled in the same class in a Danish primary school. Lindquist suggests the identity formation process for these two students becomes interlinked in their 'struggles' to 'live up to' the roles assigned to them by their teachers. At first, teachers favourite Iman, whom they considered the smart one. Over the course of several years, 'something changed' and teachers began attributing the role of 'smartest in the class' to Mohsen. The change affected their personal relationship, and they came from being best friends to a situation in which their relationship deteriorated.

To understand a process of *linked identification* and demonstrate how students pick up labels that indicate success and failure, Lundqvist employs concepts of smartness, social identification and participation framework. She argues that the ways teachers compare Iman



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and Mohsen is based on the an 'identity model' afforded by schools as institutions that create 'smarter' and 'less smart' students. Lundqvist defines linked identification as an *interpersonal process through which two or more individuals' trajectories of identification become intertwined in conflicting participation frameworks across time* (ibid.: 2). In conclusion Lundqvist, notes that exploring processes of linked identification between two or more individuals can give us better understanding of how 'personal identities' link up and change over time and show how teacher projected labels of smart and lazy can open up or impede students learning opportunities (ibid.: 16).

Thinking further:

- Linguistic ecology: One way of familiarizing yourself and your students with identities represented in the class is to focus on linguistic diversity, different home languages or local dialects. You might encourage students to share and discuss particularly important (moral or value) concepts from their own language repertoires – to use their languages and dialects in class and discuss the benefits and disadvantages of multiple languages and dialects in a classroom.
- Think about your professional identity as a teacher, and discuss which skills and competencies make up this professional identity? Comparing this to a 'student identity', reflect on and discuss actions you can take to develop the 'student identity' of all students.

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