Presentation. Identity and education: tendencies and challenges

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One of the advantages of a special issue on any subject is the possibility to assemble a collection of current, interesting and constructive contributions in a specific field of research, which enables a panoramic view of tendencies and thoughts in connection to each other. Our overall purpose with this special issue on identity and education was just that, that is to say, call for and bring together a selection of high quality articles that reflect the present tendencies in the research community with regard to how identity questions and educational issues are related.

This special issue on identity and education contains eight articles that each in a different way corresponds to our original purpose and intention. More specifically, the idea was to indicate and address the importance of specific educational research and theory on the identity processes that are taking place in educational contexts. We wanted to gather diverse perspectives on different processes of identity construction, with the intention of drawing attention to the need for interdisciplinary communication in order to cover and manage the complex relation between identity and education. In our judgement all the articles in this issue contribute to the fulfilment of these purposes. Furthermore, our impression is that the composition of this issue, with the different articles, is a rather accurate reflection of the present tendencies and currents within the field. However, before introducing the different articles, we would like to begin

by making some general reflections about the highly heterogeneous field of study, which we will here refer to as identity studies.

Though there is undeniable progress within the field we would like to address a challenge, which is a feature of any multidisciplinary territory and any attempt to gather diverse perspectives in order to enrich the view on a phenomenon instead of fragmentizing it. In that respect, this special issue is no exception. The problem is, in simple terms, one of making different perspectives talk to each other. Obviously, gathering a series of articles with different perspectives in a special issue is no way to make these perspectives communicate. However, it can help identify the need to do so and also identify the differences and points of connection that can enable the communication across disciplines and approaches. The issue is probably relevant for any research field, but in our opinion it should not be neglected in identity studies since this specific field still is struggling with concretizations, clarity in definitions and some minimal level of consensus about what we are dealing with. This has not only had consequences for the researchers but also for the communication with the world outside of academia. So, allow us a closer look at this particular challenge before moving on to a closer look at the contents of this issue.

Identity as interdisciplinary nexus

For whatever reason identity has been ascribed a centre position on the research agendas of different disciplines. In their article in this issue Atienza and van Dijk refer to Hudson and Renó, who identify identity as a key concept in the aftermath of major migratory processes, primarily to Europe and North America. As a result, identity is vastly studied as a concept, a phenomenon and a human feature. Depending on the discipline where the research is taking place, it is defined and approached in different ways. Curiously enough, the commonly assumed post-modern position to identity as something that is dynamic has not only come to characterize the view on identity, but also the field of identity studies itself. This field is indeed distinguished by being highly multifaceted, diverse, dynamic, and all encompassing. While it might be an overstatement to say that all roads lead to identity, it is safe to say that any road seems to be able to lead to identity.

Identity attracts attention from basically any discipline within human sciences, and a variety of theoretical approaches within each discipline are applied to its study. The richness of approaches results in a wide spectrum of perspectives on what identity is, how it is constructed, enacted and influenced. While the rich variety of approaches undeniably contributes to the development of the field of study as such and the development of knowledge base about identity, it also has more problematic consequences. One obvious problem is the possibilities to make different approaches complementary and connected through a process of building on each other instead of being separate and parallel perspectives.

Wertsch, Del Río and Álvarez (1995) make an evocative reflection on this very problem of multiple disciplines in human sciences and the difficulties in addressing complex human processes and issues from different perspectives, with different methods and with different disciplinary languages. As they explain, «There are languages of psychology, anthropology, linguistics, history, sociology, and so forth, and it is usually extremely difficult if not impossible to translate the account of a phenomenon from one of these languages into another. Even more dismaying is the fact that there are many mutually untranslatable languages *within* any of these disciplinary categories.» (ibid. p 2). As indicated earlier, the statement is, not the least, applicable to identity studies, where each disciplines has its own way of approaching the concept and phenomenon of identity, but where there is also an intra-disciplinary division between perspectives. Why identity is so attractive and interesting as a research object, and why it is so easy to pick and mix approaches in its study are questions that can be discussed and could probably also be a research subject in its own right. We do not claim to have any answers but would like, nevertheless, to present some reflections on the issue.

It seems that while there is an interdisciplinary consensus about the importance of identity studies and certain basic theoretical assumptions, such as its dynamic nature, as is evident in the articles in this issue, it is difficult to create a common language to conceptualize identity. Identity seems to be a concept that allows free creative exploration of different human processes and phenomenon. It seems to have infinite possibilities to enable disclosure of hidden patterns and understand connections in the social world. In other words, identity has become a tool for the study of a variety of phenomenon, such as power relations and social division and unity, the connection between emotional and cognitive process, individual positioning in groups, discursive tendencies,

sense of sameness and dissimilarity, social recognition, and not the least, the sense of belonging in educational contexts.

The use of identity as an analytical filter is not the least evident in educational research. There are even voices who have made this specific function of identity explicit. Gee (2000) suggests identity as «an analytical lens» for research in education, and Sfard & Prusak (2005) propose identity as «an analytic tool» for investigating learning. The question is what this tool consists of and how it should be used. As implied by the line of argument so far, the answer to these questions will very much depend on the disciplinary and theoretical frameworks of the respondents. The contributions in this issue represent disciplines that have a tradition of attending to both questions of identity and education, such as psychology, educational sciences and linguistics. If we have a closer look at the organizational abode of the authors it becomes evident that they, indeed, move in neighbouring disciplines with shared theoretical approaches, but where the points of attention, methodology and research objectives are bound to be different.

Yet another feature of the field of identity studies, which in our view poses a considerable challenge for the further development of the field, is one concerned with the basic definition of identity. In the articles in the present issue, as in most other publications, a variety of different definitions of identity are applied. For instance, both Rebollo and Hornillo, and de la Mata and Santamaría apply Bruner's view on identity as distributed and as the result of a person's participation in a situation, while Rivas, Leite and Herrera refer to Giddens definition of identity as a way to situate the person in a context. Evidently, these two definitions are more proximate than distant in their approach to identity as a concept and a phenomenon, indicating that the authors of the three articles probably can share the same frame of reference to a large extent. However, the abundance of definitions in what seems to be a growing theoretical market of identity, makes it necessary to not only find and apply the definition that best supports the theoretical and analytical work of each one, but also to justify that choice. At present, a systematic comparison of the ideas and the results of different articles is somewhat complicated due to the generous supply and free use of different definitions and the methodological choices that they lead to. In fact, it is interesting to note that there is not even one reference that is shared by all or even half the articles in this special issue, and yet they all give the impression to share some basic assumptions about identity, such as the earlier

mentioned tacit consensus about the conceptualization of identity as fluid and dynamic. Another implicit agreement shared by most articles, particularly those who explore social identities, is the view that identity is constructed within the dualism between majority and minority groups. Yet another example in this issue, where the similarities are conceivable but still hard to compare is as indicated further down, the articles by Rivas, Leite and Herrera on the one hand and Coll and Falsafi's on the other. In summary, the similarities and connections are generally detectable but rarely explicit.

The articles in this special issue

Despite these challenges, there is a good deal of movement and exciting development, which is also manifest in this issue. The articles in the present issue can be described as representing two major currents in the vast field of identity studies in educational contexts. One, which is mainly, focused on the construction of social identities in educational contexts, more specifically the identity construction of minority groups in the draught of opposing influences and power relations, as a result of migratory processes. The other group of articles are more diverse and divergent, but yet similar in that they take the educational context as their starting point for the exploration of, what we could call, educational identities. More specifically the authors of these articles convey an interest in means and ways of identification with the social and cultural practices of formal and informal educational contexts.

Amongst the articles that focus on social identities, we find the contribution of Vila, Esteban and Oller *National identity, language and school,* where the authors explore the construction of national identity among immigrant students under the specific circumstances of the schools in Catalunya. One of the many interesting contributions of this article is that it highlights the increased complexity of the situation in the globalized world, where dualism no longer is enough to understand power relations and the construction of a national identity. The article raises the issue of the complex reality of immigrant youth who is not only dealing with «one home culture» and «one public culture», but also where the surrounding society and public life is dealing with the tension between

two national identities; the Catalan and the Spanish. How are the struggles of the Catalan minority in a Spanish context intertwined with the struggles of the immigrant minorities in a Catalan context?

Amongst articles that address the social identity, we also find Atienza and van Dijk's *Social identity and ideology in Spanish social text books*. As indicated in the title, the article describes the results of discourse analysis on a selection of social science textbooks and reveals the ideological cultural bias that characterizes these books. The article clearly manifests that though the discourse and rhetoric of the Spanish society might have undergone a drastic transformation towards democratization, there remains considerable work to be done as far as underlying social and cultural perceptions and assumptions are concerned. Colonialism might not be a practice any more, but its remnants are still influential in today's cultural practices, not the least in educational contexts. This article points to the necessity of discursive analysis in other societies where, not long ago, the distorted distribution of power, resources and rights was still an explicit rule.

Finally, we have an article that could be described as a bridge between those who focus on social identities and identities related to educational contexts, namely *Helping immigrants identify as «university bound students»: unexpected difficulties in teaching the hidden curriculum* by Mortimer, Wortham and Allard. The article explores the processes through which the social identity of a group of students of Latin American descent interferes with their possibilities of identifying themselves as students who can access higher education. The approach of the article to the construction of both identities is an illustrative and clear description of the dialogic construction of identities, requiring the recognition of oneself as well as that from significant others. «The others» in this case are the teachers that try to apply a curricular activity, or in other terms a mediating tool, that is aimed at helping these students identify as university bound students. The conclusion of the authors is that educational practices are difficult to change unless the underlying concepts and attitudes are taken into consideration. Furthermore, the article clearly manifests the challenge of walking the talk and turning rhetorical plans into action. It becomes evident that identity construction requires both discursive action and activity.

Moving on to a brief presentation of the articles that are more focused on educational identities, let us start with Polman's *The zone of proximal identity development in apprenticeship learning*. Polman's contribution is not only

valuable to this special issue but to identity research with a sociocultural orientation in general, as it attempts to connect the construction of identity to one of Vygotsky's key concepts for understanding human development. Though Polman's idea is highly theoretical, his exploration takes the concrete context of apprenticeship as the framework for the description of the «zone of proximal *identity* development». Once again attention is drawn to the importance of significant others in the construction of identities. Polman's application of the Vygotskian concept enables potential new explorations of how educational contexts can approach identity construction as a process that requires guidance, support and recognition from more expert others.

Following Polman's article is *The construction of the self in educational settings – a cultural psychological approach,* by de la Mata and Santamaría. This is the only article in this issue that focuses on the construction of a general personal identity, or as they also denominate it, the self. It is also interesting since it represents a common occurrence in many publications, where the self and identity are treated as equivalent. In light of this focus, the authors explore the formation of, what they call, the modern mind under the influence of the educational practices of contemporary societies. Their findings of specific sociocultural patterns in the autobiographies of the interviewed subjects are an indicator of the influence of the educational system as a constructor of not only knowledge but also individuals.

Similar to de la Mata and Santamaría, Rivas, Leite and Herrera apply a methodology based on autobiographies to explore how the individuals are shaped and how they construct educational identities under the influence of the educational systems. Besides the general value of their article, one particularly valuable contribution in their approach is their basic assumption and claim that educational contexts should pay more attention to the individuals' subjective perception of the educational experience. The authors explore how the social and political structures of the educational context influence on the educational identity of their interviewees and their individual narratives of educational experiences from early schooling to higher education.

The interest in the individual subject is also present in Coll and Falsafi's article, where they point to the construction of individuals parallel to the construction of knowledge. While Rivas, Leite and Herrera talk of educational identity and focus on formal educational contexts, Coll and Falsafi focus on the construction of a sense of recognition as a learner in general. In this sense, there are evident points

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of connection between the two articles. However, Coll and Falsafi's *Learner identity- an educational and analytical tool* is mainly a theoretical presentation of the concept of learner identity and the analysis of its construction. The authors also emphasize the need for a shift of perspectives where the subjective experience of the learner is awarded an undisputed position, and suggest that learner identity, as a key functional identity for the educational contexts, could enable this shift.

We will finalize the presentation of the contributions to this special issue with the article *Emotional perspective in the construction of identity in educational contexts: emotion, discourse and conflicts* by Rebollo and Hornillo. The study concerns the narrative construction of identities related to educational failure. This article is particularly relevant since its locus of attention is an often overlooked and rarely studied element; namely emotions. Though the importance of emotional processes in identity construction has been identified and is mentioned from time to time, there is still plenty of work to be done on the subject. This article is undeniably an important contribution to the development of our understanding of the relation between different significant elements, such as cultural mediators and the discursive construction of narratives and emotions, that not only influence on the identities that are constructed in educational contexts, but which also are essential parts of these identities.

In short, the articles in this special issue offer a comprehensive view on several key issues that attract the attention of identity researchers, and as such they make significant contributions to the field.

Moving on from here

The basic assumption behind this special issue on identity and education was that there is a need for bridges between the many and diverse approaches to identity and its place in educational contexts. This special issue is a small step forward to the creation of this bridge, but as indicated earlier there are still challenges to be tackled. We need to initiate efforts to make the implicit shared understandings more explicit and evident, elaborate on shared definitions, and improve methodological rigour that enables reuse and development of shared

analytical dimensions and categories. We need to recognize the complexity of the globalized world, as indicated by some of the articles. This implies a shift from an ideological navigation in the world in dualistic terms, (such as privileged and oppressed, the dominated and the dominant, etc.), to the identification of the complex relations and connections that are not necessarily recognized or explained by traditional ideologies. All research is potentially ideological, but while it might be more hidden in other fields of research, with identity the ideological positioning of the researcher is often more evident.

An obvious risk of how we formulate our research questions and where we direct our attention is that we tend to re-produce the very structures and patterns that we are trying to unravel, make manifest and change. By constantly directing our attention towards the so-called underprivileged and labelling specific groups of students as such, we run the risk of upholding their position as underprivileged. As a result their identities are treated as static although the theoretical notion states that it is dynamic and shifting. Furthermore, the consequence of this somewhat restricted focus is that the «other» group tends to be forgotten and neglected. Identities are constructed by both the so called dominated and dominating and we need to understand both processes of construction if we are to not only describe the educational reality, but also influence it.

The strength of having identity as the object of study is that it enables a holistic view on social processes, and the revelation of hidden connections between the social and the individual, as well as the relation between undisclosed social and contextual circumstances and the individuals' perceptions of themselves. It is even possible to make use of identity as a bridge between research and educational policy and practice. However, in order to make maximum use of its potency, we need to, not only, conduct relevant research on identity as such, but also scrutinize our use of the concept, our perspectives and methodology, and our results. In other words, the field of identity studies is still in the making and needs to be developed per se, just as the knowledge about its core concept, the identity. One might say that we need to re-construct the identity of identity studies.

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