

Identity, Plurality, And Education

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IDENTITY AS AN AIM OF EDUCATION

Many theorists of education have defined school as a place where competencies, knowledge, and attitudes are transmitted to a new generation, and family education as the locus for the transmission of cultural and moral ideals, values and norms. Such a view, of course, leaves out the most important element of education, and reduces educational theory to an applied developmental psychology and a sociology of education. Unless cultural transmission is understood as a totally mechanistic and determined form of socialization (in which case only a borderline case of educational theory remains), the aim of this transmission is always that the pupil learn to give meaning to "things" and "facts," and to act socially in an autonomous way according to his or her own judgment. Besides the acquisition of competencies, this calls for the development of personal identity which includes being aware of oneself as a consistently and continuously judging and acting person. Without this quality, human agency seems unthinkable.

In educational theory, however, this aim of personal identity has often gone unanalyzed in the sense that it has been accepted without questioning its validity. The possibility of a contribution of education to its attainment has normally been seen as self-evident. Only recently, since the quality of the cultural resources to be transmitted has come into question (for instance by the work of German Critical Pedagogy), and the "postmodern" plurality of culture has come to be seen as a potential problem in reaching identity, has educational theory begun to be interested in analyzing and questioning the assumptions behind the idea of personal identity. In this paper, I will summarize parts of this emergent discussion, and make some modest contributions to it.

My argument has three parts. First, I will summarize a theory of personal identity that seems to be commonly accepted at the moment. Second, I will examine the ways educational theories have conceptualized the contribution of education to the formation of autonomy in the light of the problem of plurality. Finally, I will propose a different theory, inspired by a semiotic reading of the work of Vygotsky.¹

THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

Erikson² suggests that in the course of ontogeny, learning "a group's basic ways of organizing experience" (group identity), in combination with becoming aware of one's own physiological and psychological traits (personal identity), leads to the development of "ego identity." This he describes alternately as "the awareness of a style of individuality" and "the sense of being capable of acting effectively within a group." Thus, it is clear that identity is a concept which refers both to individual and group characteristics, to differences and to communalities, and to the way an individual learns to combine these characteristics into a more or less stable and consistent whole. In psychoanalytic theory, which underlies Erikson's model, the ego (or ego process) is a term for describing the process of maintaining this consistency.

For Rorty and Wong, "a person's identity is constituted by a configuration of central traits...that typically make a systematic difference to the course of a person's life, to the habit-forming and

action-guiding social categories in which she is placed, to the way that she acts, reacts, and interacts."³ They distinguish traits that have to do with body awareness and somatic self-confidence; individual temperament and psychological characteristics; social and institutional roles; group or collective identity; ideals, norms, and ideal self images. Such traits can have a more or less central position in a hierarchy of traits; moreover, the "objective" centrality of a trait (as expressed in behavior and/or as perceived by others) may not correspond to its "subjective" centrality (as experienced by the person herself).⁴ The role of the ego is replaced here by the concept of hierarchy.

It is important to realize the importance of what Erikson calls the ego process. Personality traits may, and usually will, be in conflict, both between and within categories. The hierarchy of traits is seldom a perfect one. Even if we conceive of needs, interests, and psychological characteristics as "authentic," not socially influenced personality traits,⁵ these will contain conflicting elements. This is, for instance, recognized in the "psychological" anthropology of Plato who suggests that conflicting desires should be "tamed," moderated by will and rationality. Generally speaking, the fact of potential conflict seems to require some sort of governing instance which insures self-identity over time and in different contexts. In the view not only of Plato, but of many theorists, such self-identity can only be warranted by a second "part" of the concept of identity -- the ego or self -- which differs from, and is placed above, the hierarchy of personality traits.

Education is habitually seen as an important factor in the construction of a social identity, or in the terms of Rorty and Wong, of the communal aspects of individual trait hierarchies. (In fact, in many texts on education, identity is equated with group identity.) Education has the task of providing the group's "basic ways of organizing experience" which includes ideals and norms (which are considered to make up the "good" person) as well as accepted ways of interpreting and giving meaning to phenomena. It also provides the cultural resources which constitute models both of traits and of their possible relationships. Schooling, as a societal enterprise, has been charged with the task of providing elements for a national or even universal identity. In any country where curriculum decisions have been made at a central level, or a general education program has been discussed, one of the suggested aims of such a program has been the creation of communality, of a common "expectation horizon," to facilitate the coordination of behavior for the members of a nation, or of all people.

It is a common position among educational theorists that in traditional societies, because of their cultural consistency, group identity (as provided by educational processes of various kinds) was enough to ensure internal consistency of the person as well, and autonomy was hardly an issue. This also means that, in such societies, a systematic introduction to the communal knowledge and values base (a "material education") should be enough to produce a coherent personality. In this traditional view of education, then, rationality is thought to coincide with "the group's basic ways of organizing experience"; and the development of will serves to ascertain that reason will indeed prevail over the more individual traits and desires. As self and rationality coincide in this view, it is clear that education does not have to worry about the development of the self as a separate task.

Our present society, however, distinguishes itself from traditional ones precisely by the fact that its culture is not consistent, but pluralistic. (It is a matter of speculation and historical interpretation in how far this has, in fact, always been the case.) This has implications both for the development of identity and for the tasks of education. In the next section, I will discuss some of the ways in which educational theory has tried to cope with these implications.

AUTONOMY AND PLURALITY

Two factors have been important in the rethinking of identity. One is the realization that, in our society, there is not one basic way of organizing experience; there are many group cultural identities, and they are not easily reconciled or commensurated. The second is the discovery that power

relations play an important part in creating an illusion of consistency and suppressing the free development of identity structures.

As a reaction to this, our culture attaches great value to the avoidance of indoctrination and the possibility of autonomous choice. Thus, if education provides the cultural resources for personality formation, our present educational ideal is not that children learn to internalize a prescribed cultural (group) identity, but that they are enabled to pursue self-chosen goals and relationships and "create" their own personality by choosing between their possibilities. Self-identity as autonomy and being a subject is, thus, valued more highly than being a "good" or consistent personality. Autonomy and agency have become the primary aims of education.

In what way can education promote autonomy? The accepted view of "modern" education has been that it should counter the fragmenting tendencies of modern society with a universalizing and formalizing move. Rationality is no longer thought to exist in the traditional knowledge of a group; instead, it is thought of as a universal capacity which transcends particular thought systems. Adequate (and acceptable) behavior is equated with behavior guided by universal principles.

This idea is behind the traditional view of school education. Schools are considered to have the task of teaching logical thinking procedures and universally valid facts on which these procedures can operate, producing "rational humans" who are able not only to rationally control their desires, but also to critically evaluate the prejudices and unwarranted ideas of everyday (group) culture. Contrary to what I said earlier, this means that defining schools as places for information transmission does imply a specific view of identity (which, however, is seldom voiced). In fact, the idea of producing rational humans is central to what has been called the "project of modernity." In this model of identity, the upper, superior level of rationality controls the lower level of personality, the domain of choices, plurality and even contradictions. In some views, this leads to a sharp distinction between school education as the domain of the rational, and family education as the domain of tradition and (preparation for) choices. As Marshall shows,⁶ in such a view, the range of rationality is twofold: critically testing for truth where applicable, as well as deliberating and choosing in accordance with a self-formulated scale of values where the truth criterion does not apply. The latter aspect requires that the child be enabled to develop according to its own needs and desires. Progressive pedagogy has stressed that education should provide a stimulating and emotionally safe environment in which this development may take place. Some progressive theorists hold that personal identity will result more or less automatically from the (stimulated) growth of a principle innate in every human being. In their learning and development process, pupils should be enabled to make their own choices between traditions or elements from traditions, based on their own authentic needs, interests, and preferences. "This...presupposes that needs and interests themselves are not socially constructed, or that decision making processes which underlie choosing between needs and interests are not problematic."⁷ Seen in this way, personality is a "product of nature," an outcome of natural growth, and learning about the physical and social environment is only made possible by the development of this personality.

Such educational philosophers as Peters and Scheffler have formulated a revised, "modern" version of this educational ideal, combining it with a cognitive developmental view of ontogeny.⁸ There is a "formal education" view, in which pupils appropriate a number of forms of thinking which have a universal, or at least supra-traditional, validity. This extends the domain of rationality beyond the truth criterion. Because such forms of thinking do not have content, acquiring them presupposes that pupils have first appropriated the material contents of cultural traditions (a social or collective identity). Learning the forms of thinking at the same time represents a later and higher, post-conventional stage of development which enables pupils to take a critical stance towards their social identity and, thus, to realize a "personalized" autonomous relation to that tradition. Plurality of values and views is therefore contained and subsumed under universal principles. The idea of incompatibility of different views is seen as characteristic of a prior developmental stage. Thus, Van Haaften and Snik consider the validity of the forms of thinking as ultimately warranted by the

formal characteristics of language and communication, as elaborated in the "transcendental pragmatics" of Apel and Habermas. (This also implies that the possibility of recognizing and using adequate forms of thinking is the result of a long process of sociogenetic development or progress.)

While such a theory may be seen as an extension and reformulation of Piaget's epistemology, Habermas has given a version of it that is inspired by critical theory.⁹ Habermas endorses the position that, in our society, the structures of interaction in which individuals participate do not realize the ideals implicit in language use and are oppressive. Under such conditions, autonomy is repressed. The structure of our society is such that current educational situations can only produce either an internally divided, or an ideologically curtailed personality structure, depending on how one estimates the degree of dominance of hegemonic culture. Other theories consider the internally consistent person to be the self-evident aim of education; but this can, under current conditions in society, no longer be regarded as a factual or even a possible result of education. In fact, education has deteriorated into what Adorno called "Halbbildung" (semi-education).¹⁰ Transmission of knowledge has displaced personality formation as the aim of education. Its primary function is to ensure the production of persons that fit into existing societal structures. Thus, critical theorists are pessimistic about the possibilities of education in our society. They understand education primarily as a means for continuing repression, not as a means for individual self-realization. The central category of critical pedagogy -- emancipation -- refers to the necessity of reclaiming a space for autonomy and subjectivity. As the structures of communication that individuals internalize are neither harmonious nor consistent, the implication for contemporary education is that, in order to reach individual rationality, the individual needs the competence to distance herself from internalized role positions and to reflect on and interpret these positions. Thus, identity no longer coincides with the internalized role patterns, the generalized other, but is elevated to a formal level. Identity presupposes distance from the self, and the ability to handle different, mutually inconsistent roles.

Whether in its classical or its modern form, the identification of autonomy with rationality is based on a harmonious world view. This holds true even for critical pedagogy, where harmony is seen as a counterfactual ideal. In such a view inconsistencies and contradictions are valued negatively and are seen as barriers to be overcome in the course of development and/or learning. They are not part of the "real" world, but only of our inadequate conceptions of it. Thus, such theories imply a form of Cartesian dualism, where "mind" in the course of the developmental process evolves to eventually reflect the "real" structures of the world -- albeit in the "modern" version "world" implies culture and the structure of human communication. The implication is also that for every domain, there is ultimately only one way of "doing things right."

Other theories of autonomy tend in a totally different direction. Such theories are based on the view that the plurality of cultural traditions is fundamentally irreducible and should be dealt with as such. Basically, rationality in such views is understood to exist only within traditions, not above or outside them. This necessarily leads to the position that, where only one way of being and acting rationally is recognized, this must be the result of the suppression of other rationalities by power structures. Thus, Marshall comments on progressive education theory:

The Western educational tradition emphasizes logic and truth, as if these notions have not themselves been constituted by various power structures and relationships of power. Once we admit such possibilities, especially in relation to the human sciences, then the notion of the autonomous chooser becomes problematic. Indeed it becomes possible that needs, interests and choice, the notion of autonomy, and even identity itself, have been constituted in various ways.¹¹

Thus, autonomy emerges as a political notion itself, instead of being the epitome of individual identity in the face of societal plurality and oppression. It is, of course, Foucault who has elaborated on this notion denying the existence of identity and rationality outside of power structures. Identity is the result of the exclusion of other possibilities. Larrosa elaborates on this argument translating it

in terms of language structures. According to him, identity is reached by closing the mind to certain "experiences of language." Education is instrumental in this closing process:

On the one hand, education is a matter of language....Thus, it has been necessary to control texts and textual practices from the point of view of their educational value. On the other hand, education is a matter of subjectivisation as well....Thus, it has been necessary to build up a normative idea of the good subjectivity, sometimes in terms of stability, unity and identity.¹²

In such a view, then, education is conceptualized as an instrument for controlling the plurality of world views in order to achieve identity structures that will fit in with the existing power structures. It expresses a societal fear of plurality which is perceived as a threat to power structures and stability. This view also is at odds with the first category of theories about autonomy that I have discussed -- those in which some form of rationality warrants autonomy. It sees these views as ideologies produced under those same power relations. But this, of course, evokes the question of whether autonomy and identity are not merely ideological concepts and humans are no more than products of existing powers and texts.

Many attempts to save the concept of human autonomy, including those of Foucault himself, have relied heavily on the idea that somewhere within the human individual, or in supra-individual structures like language, a "niche" can be found which can be the germ of a personality structure and a subject autonomy outside of power structures. In fact, the theories of critical theorists like Habermas may be interpreted in this sense. In the next section, however, I will draw an outline of a discursive theory based on the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin which takes plurality itself not as something to be mastered by autonomy, but as the very source of autonomy. It concentrates on the fact that the individual is not a passive recipient of cultural structures, but participates actively in constructing a system of meanings.

PLURALITY AND AUTHORSHIP

A discursive theory of autonomy, in fact, denies the existence of the self. That is, it does not recognize it as a stable, substantiated part of the person which acts as a consistent governing instance for thought and action. Instead, individual identity is seen as a continuous production¹³ in which a discursive position is created again and again in the course of participation in specific social activities and before a specific public. Identity is not a given, but a project, the result of which is always only a temporary local stability. The task of maintaining an identity is not one of balancing between the expectations of others and those of the individual itself; rather, the balancing act is between different expectations, each of which have been partly internalized. Every person has a feeling of belonging to different communities that can be in conflict with each other. Coordination of activities is not accomplished by some "deeper" ego level, but by the exigencies of joint activity in a social situation. Identity is not only produced dialogically; it always retains a dialogical character. This theory radicalizes the position of Mead that thinking is equal to internalized conversation. Not the individual, but social activity is the basic unit in thinking about humanity. The boundary between inner and outer world does not coincide with the skin, but is situated within the individual. Moreover, the boundary is not fixed once and for all.

For some commentators on "the postmodern condition," the acceptance of this model of identity implies that postmodern human beings must be schizophrenics. They believe that, under postmodern conditions, no stable structures of society exist which could ensure identity, that is, make sense of the internal contradictions within the individual. Their views imply that only in an earlier stage in history was it possible for individuals to reach a unified identity. In fact, such comments exhibit a false nostalgia for harmony characteristic of the modern, universalistic view of identity. A different interpretation would be that a stable identity, in this sense, has always been an ideological illusion, the true character of which only becomes visible under current historical conditions. This does not, of course, imply that humans have always been schizophrenic without knowing it. One can only come to that conclusion if one holds the "modern" view of personal identity. If, however, we are

prepared to leave that view behind, the question becomes how people can learn to manage such contradictions and how, even under postmodern conditions, a stable identity can develop. If we are to understand identity in a different way, we also need a new theory of the development of identity.

In short, a theory of the discursive development of identity along Vygotskian lines¹⁴ would have the following characteristics. To begin with, the internalization of the "ways of signifying" of the community should not be conceived as a transition from "outside" to "inside." It is, rather, the transition from what a child can or wants to do in the context of a social, joint activity -- "going above itself" in the social relationship -- to what it can or wants to do individually and independently. That is, the boundary between the not-yet and the already-internalized repertoires lies inside the individual. Such a theory, therefore, does not only deny that something like an "authentic" human subject exists and needs only to be developed, it goes on to deny that the *individual* is an adequate unity from which to understand human identity. Identity becomes understandable only in connection with social relations.

However, the human subject is not understood as just the inevitable product of social factors. It is not the social structures themselves that are internalized, but the meaning the individual learns to give to these structures in interacting with others and in relating this to what it has learned before. Internalization is an activity of meaning-giving and digestion, not a process of transmission in which the individual is only a passive receiver. It is true that, in a way, socially existing positions are internalized; but these are empowering as much as limiting. And they are not internalized "as given." Learning does not mean being fitted with a totally new repertoire of behavior, it consists of qualitative changes in an already existing repertoire. At the same time, learning means learning about yourself -- building perspectives of yourself in relation to the learning situations you find yourself in.¹⁵ This generates a sense of identity over time -- a sense of self -- but does not presuppose the existence of a separate and always identical "self." In different situations, before different audiences, the individual may be guided by different perspectives which may be partially incompatible. Nor does learning have a definite end; as long as there is contradiction in the social relations, learning occurs and identity keeps changing. The theory has a positive attitude toward such change. An individual who does not change anymore is dead, either literally or figuratively. The same holds true for a culture or a society. Continuous growth, not harmony and homeostasis is the ideal here. This holds true on the individual level (that is, individual development does not have an end) as well as on the level of society (we can only speak of "history" if and when development takes place). And the two levels interact: individual activities may generate societal change.

In the course of his or her development, each individual learns to handle the facts of change and contradiction in a certain way: either negating them or valuing them negatively, or understanding them as opportunities for development and using them in a positive way. Thus, people learn to manage their own development. Education can play a crucial part here by stimulating certain ways of handling contradictions. The universe of discourse of Vygotsky-oriented educators is not conceptualized in terms of consistency, but of openness. Contradictions should not be resolved or covered too soon. A "pluralist attitude"¹⁶ is a major aim of education here.¹⁷ Ideological critique is aimed at situations which impede openness.

Ultimately, in this theory autonomy is equated with the ability to not only handle change and plurality in a positive way, but also to contribute to the "writing" of the cultural "texts" that make up this plurality. Autonomous individuals are not just the product of these texts; they also are its *co-authors*. Creative participation in culture, that is, cultural (co-)authorship, characterizes the truly autonomous person.

1. James V. Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).
2. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968).
3. A.O. Rorty and D. Wong, "Aspects of Identity and Agency," in *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. O. Flanagan and A.O. Rorty (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1990), 19.
4. See Doret de Ruyter and Siebren Miedema, "Schools, Identity and the Conception of the Good: the Denominational Tradition as an Example," in *Identity, Culture and Education*. Papers of the Fourth Biennial Conference of the International Network of Philosophers of Education (INPE), Leuven, Belgium, 17 - 20 August 1994, 145-56.
5. This in itself is highly questionable. See J.D. Marshall, "The Autonomous Chooser and 'Reforms' in Education," in *Identity, Culture and Education*, 223-31.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 225.
8. See W. van Haaften and G. Snik, "Algemene vorming als ontprovincialisering van het denken" in *Pedagogiek en Pluralisme*, ed. F. Heyting and H.-E. Tenorth (Amsterdam: POW, 1993), 61-77.
9. See Willem Wardekker and Siebren Miedema, "Critical Pedagogy: Evaluation and Reformulation," in *Politics, Sociology and Economics of Education. International and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. R. Farnen and H. Sünker (New Brunswick: Transaction, forthcoming 1995).
10. Theodor W. Adorno, "Theorie der Halbbildung," in T.W. Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972).
11. J.D. Marshall, "The Autonomous Chooser," 225.
12. Jorge Larrosa, "Identity, Education, and the Experience of Language: A Comment of the Platonic Banishment of Poets," in *Identity, Culture and Education*, 201v.
13. Rom Harré and Grant Gillett, *The Discursive Mind* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), 110.
14. Bert van Oers, "De betekenis van de cultuurhistorische benadering voor de vormgeving van onderwijsleerprocessen," in *Handboek Leerlingbegeleiding* (Alphen: Samson, 1993).
15. Harré and Gillett, (104), identify the relevant dimensions of situations as: space, time, agency/responsibility, and social place. They interpret the "sense of self" as a sense of having a place in these dimensions, acquired through activity.
16. Adalbert Rang, "Pedagogiek en Pluralisme," in *Pedagogiek en Pluralisme*, ed. F. Heyting and H.-E. Tenorth (Amsterdam: POW, 1993), 18-45.
17. S. Roegholt, "Towards a Concept of Multiperspective Education," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 25, no. 2 (1993): 153-67.