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Learning selves

Learner identity development in school and beyond

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Publication date

2021

Document Version

Other version

License

Other

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Citation for published version (APA):

Verhoeven, M. (2021). *Learning selves: Learner identity development in school and beyond*.

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CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

"I mean, the more things you learn, the more experience you gain with all sorts of things and, yes, I kind of really like learning [...] Let's say you learn about something new and you really start to like it, then you discover more about what you may want to do in the future. It may really help you later on" (Miriam, 14 years old, prevocational track).

"Honestly, I like learning new things [...] It is just nice to get to know about new things and to be able to use them even though you don't know yet what you may use them for" (Jade, 14 years old, pre-university track).

The statements above represent aspects of two adolescents' learner identities. Learner identities regard the ways in which people view themselves as learners. Furthermore, they inform the shape people's learning trajectories take (Coll & Falsafi, 2010). For example, based on the quotes above, it seems rather likely that Miriam and Jade will obtain knowledge and acquire skills in a wide variety of domains, and pursue the highest educational degrees they are capable of. At least from a teacher's perspective, Miriam and Jade appear to be ideal students. However, not all students develop such learner identities. Take this statement of Kay (15 years old, prevocational track) for example: "When I find something difficult [in school], I just quit. I do everything that is easy, everything that I am capable of doing and that I enjoy doing. Other stuff I just don't do". What is more, Kay reported to often feel that he is not capable of learning the things that he is taught in school and, consequently, he tended to disengage from school. Additionally, the majority of students probably have learner identities that are similar to Jori's one. Jori (15 years old, intermediate track) stated, in the first interview that was held with him for the sake of the present dissertation: "Take drawing for example, I find that the least important class. Alright, it might help you to develop your motor skills, but does

it help you to become a good CEO of a commercial company? That's how I feel about it". Students like Jori may engage in some classes, but cannot be bothered in others. Thus far, it has been established that adolescents' learner identities inform their current and future school engagement (e.g., Mortimer, Wortham, & Allard, 2010; Rubin, 2007). As concerns have recently been raised about the relatively low school engagement of adolescents in Dutch secondary education (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2019; OECD, 2016, 2017), it is important to understand how adolescents' learner identities develop and how this development can be supported. These are the issues at stake in the present dissertation.

On a theoretical level, it has been acknowledged that learner identities do not only develop over time, but also across contexts, such as the contexts of school, home and peer groups (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Pollard & Filer, 2007). However, limited empirical insights have been provided into how adolescents' learner identities develop across contexts (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Vetter, Fairbanks, & Ariail, 2011). The research field on learner identities has mainly been concerned with what learning experiences in school may cause adolescents to develop learner identities that impede their school engagement (e.g., Calabrese Barton, Kang, Tan, O'Neill, Bautista-Guerra, & Brecklin, 2013; Rubin, 2007). From this research field indications can be derived, though, that if we want to learn more about how adolescents' learner identity development can be supported in school, the role that other contexts play in this process should be taken into account too.

More in general, many studies have shown that when adolescents find it hard to relate their experiences in school to their out-of-school experiences this may prevent them from engaging in school—simply put, when they see little real-world value in what they learn in school (Anderson, 2007; Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Rubin, 2007; Seaton, 2007; Willis, 1977). Furthermore, research suggests that students from backgrounds that are underrepresented in higher education (e.g., students with a migrant background or a lower socioeconomic background) encounter more challenges in relating to their education than other students (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). For example, an ethnographic study by Cone, Buxton, Lee and Mahotiere (2014) on students from Haitian descent who attend schools in the United States demonstrated how confusing it may be for adolescents when their parents expect them to be quiet and obedient in school, while their teachers encourage them to express their own opinions and think critically. If schools and teachers fail to recognize that

adolescents encounter such discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts, or blame the resulting disengagement of students on deficiencies relating to these students and their communities, inequalities in opportunities to engage in school may occur. Yet, what role the different contexts that adolescents participate in play in the development of their learner identities—when these contexts do and do not support the development of self-understandings as learners that foster adolescents’ school engagement—has remained underexposed. This applies too to the issue of how adolescents’ learner identity development can be supported. Also in daily educational practice limited attention can be found for students’ learner identities. Learner identities develop more or less accidentally, causing some students to come to think of themselves as learners in ways that do not foster their school engagement (Volman, 2015). Therefore, this dissertation’s overarching aim is to gain knowledge about the role that different (school, home, work) contexts play in the development of adolescents’ learner identities. In doing so, the thesis aims to contribute to our understanding of how schools and teachers may support the learner identity development of their students in ways that foster their school engagement.

LEARNER IDENTITIES AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT

Learner identities are people’s rather stable and coherent self-understandings as learners (Coll & Falsafi, 2010). In the research project presented here, learner identities and their development are understood from a sociocultural perspective (e.g., Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Learning and learner identity development are considered to be intrinsically intertwined: by engaging in learning experiences, individuals develop new knowledge and skills *and* come to understand themselves in relation to the knowledge and skills that they try to master (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998; Polman, 2010; Silseth & Arnseth, 2011; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011): by engaging in learning practices (e.g., an inquiry-based learning project, an English class, a salsa dance class), one becomes familiar with certain skills, while learning what one’s strengths and weaknesses with respect to these practices are and whether one enjoys engaging in these practices. Based on this, a person may or may not come to identify with (elements of) specific learning practices: they may or may not become of significance to who one is as a learner (Black, Williams, Hernandez-Martinez, Davis, Pampaka, & Wake, 2010). This brings us to an important feature of learner identities, namely their

multidimensional character. People are thought to develop a range of rather specific self-understandings as learners, for example as a science student (a science identity), a soccer trainee (soccer identity) or a history student (a history identity), that are then integrated into their more comprehensive learner identities. These, in turn, together with self-understandings that are not necessarily learning-related (e.g., the identity of being a son or a daughter), form subdimensions of people's overarching personal identities (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al. 1998; Holland & Lave 1991).

To comprehend how people come to understand themselves as learners in the way they do, it is important to acknowledge that the processes of learning and learner identity development people engage in are dependent on the affordances and constraints of the contexts they participate in (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Evnistkaya & Morton, 2011; Polman, 2010; Silseth & Arnseth, 2011; Wortham, 2006). To illustrate, whereas one school may especially stimulate students to engage in science learning, another school may be more concerned with students' creative development. Together, the learning experiences a context affords and constrains convey the learner identity positions and learning notions that are prevalent and valued there. Learner identity positions concern the social roles as learners that are available, such as the creative learner, or the fast learner. Learning notions regard ideas about the learning goals that are worth pursuing and how these should be pursued (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998). For example, positioning oneself as a fast learner may be praiseworthy in one context, whereas meticulousness may be prioritized in another context. It is based on adolescents' engagement in learning experiences in various contexts, and their level of identification with each of the contexts' learner identity positions and learning notions, that they come to develop their learner identities: that they come to tell themselves and others rather steady stories about who they are as learners in ways that connect their past learning experiences, their present learning engagements and their future learning goals (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland et al., 1998; Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

As no one moves across exactly the same contexts engaging in the exact same experiences, learning and learner identity development are idiosyncratic processes. In other words, all adolescents engage in unique trajectories of learning and learner identity development (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Silseth & Arnseth, 2011). Dependent on the learning experiences that adolescents have engaged in in various contexts, they may experience a relatively high degree of continuity or discontinuity between school and out-of-school contexts in

the learner identity positions and learning notions that are available and valued there (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016). An example of discontinuities in learning notions was already provided above by the study of Cone et al. (2014). It is in relation to continuities and discontinuities, and the learner identity positions and learning notions they represent, that adolescents develop and maintain their learner identities. That some students experience a high degree of discontinuity between school and out-of-school contexts, whereas others do not is poignant as researchers have found that adolescents may disengage from school when they encounter discrepancies between their own ideas of how they can and want to learn on the one hand, and their school's ideas about learning on the other (Rubin, 2007; Mortimer et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important to learn more about how continuities and discontinuities between adolescents' school and out-of-school contexts inform their learner identity development so that we can better understand and support their school engagement.

THE RESEARCH'S DESIGN AND SCOPE

To better understand and support adolescents' school engagement, this dissertation addresses the following overarching research question:

What role do continuities and discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts that adolescents participate in play in their learner identity development?

The ethnographic research that is conducted to answer this research question mainly studies this research question from the perspectives of adolescents themselves. In total, this thesis consists of four separate studies: a literature review was performed, a conceptual framework was developed and two empirical studies were conducted. The latter were based on interviews with 22 adolescents as well as on observation and student assessment and assignment data of the various classes ($n = 50$) these focal students participated in. Whereas the interviews regarded the students' learning experiences in the different contexts they participated in, the other data was collected to examine how various learner identity positions, that may or may not foster continuities for (certain) students, were conveyed in schools.

As the research project presented in this thesis is explorative in nature, the goal of this dissertation is to contribute to theoretical understandings based on empirical findings. Hence, this research project did not aim to present empirical generalizations. Adolescents who differed from each other in their

school engagement, the educational track they were in (mainly in the most theoretical-oriented prevocational track and the pre-university tracks) and the pedagogical approach their schools had adopted (a Waldorf, Montessori or traditional approach) were recruited to participate in the study. In this way, it was aimed for variety in the affordances and constraints that the participating students encountered so as to allow for a comparative perspective. Such a perspective is helpful in the development of knowledge and enhances the validity of the research findings (e.g., Merriam, 1998). In comparing the differences and similarities between these students in their encountered (dis-)continuities and learner identities, a better understanding could be gained of how adolescents' experienced continuities and discontinuities, their learner identities, and their school engagement are related.

For several reasons, exclusively adolescents in ninth grade classrooms were recruited for the study. First, ninth grade students have already spent at least two years in secondary education, which makes them more familiar with the learner identity positions and learning notions that are prevalent in their schools, school tracks and classrooms than students from lower grades. Second, Dutch secondary education comprises different educational tracks (prevocational, intermediate and pre-university tracks). In the ninth grade, most students are enrolled in the track they will eventually graduate in. This is an important affordance (or constraint) to take into account too as Van den Bulk (2011) demonstrated that collective stereotypes of students in particular tracks are often integrated in adolescents' status positioning and future prospects of both themselves and others. Hence, it is likely that this may inform their learner identities. Finally, despite the fact that the students in the prevocational track had already transferred into so-called subject clusters—e.g., culture and society, or nature and health—the students in the classrooms that participated in the research project still took most of their classes together, which is often no longer the case in the tenth grade, especially in the pre-university track. Hence, in the ninth grade a relatively high degree of diversity in students' trajectories of learning and learner identity development is likely to be found in one particular classroom. Students who already decided to never pursue a career that involves, for example, science, are still obliged to take this class. This brings along certain challenges for teachers in supporting all their students in relating to the taught subject matter, which made ninth grade classrooms particularly insightful for this dissertation's research project.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

In this section, the four studies included in this dissertation are introduced. Chapters 2 through 5 each present one of these studies, that are all set up as separate journal articles. Consequently, some overlap in the theoretical framework and the description of the research context in these chapters is inevitable. However, it also allows each chapter to be read on its own.

To start, processes of learner identity development in school were scrutinized. Therefore, in Chapter 2 a systematic literature review is presented on the role of school in the development of adolescents' school- and learning-related identity dimensions. The review also contained studies on adolescents' personal and social identity development. The research question that guided this study was 'What insights does the existing literature provide into the role of educational processes in adolescents' personal, social, and school- and learning-related identity development?'. In total, 111 scientific publications were included in the review. Three groups of studies were identified and are discussed in Chapter 2. These concern, respectively, studies on how schools and teachers may unintentionally inform adolescents' identity development, studies on how schools and teachers can intentionally support adolescents' identity development and studies on required conditions in schools and classrooms to effectively foster adolescents' identity development.

In Chapter 3 the following two research questions are examined: 'What continuities and discontinuities in learning notions are encountered by adolescents with different levels of school engagement?' and 'What relations can be found between the contextual continuities and discontinuities in learning notions these adolescents encountered, and their learner identities?'. Based on student interviews, it is explored what continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between school and out-of-school contexts appear to inform students' learner identities and how.

Chapter 4 presents a conceptual framework to understand and study the role of students' agency related to their school engagement and disengagement. The research question that is answered in this chapter is 'How does our conceptualization of learning preferences and agency help to understand and study processes of student (dis-)engagement?'. The conceptual framework that is discussed addresses when, how and why adolescents, in encountering contextual continuities or discontinuities, may exercise their agency to (re-)negotiate engaging learning experiences in school – that is, learning experiences that are in correspondence with the learning preferences that form part of their learner identities. Additionally, an exemplary case study is presented.

Chapter 5 reports on a study regarding how teachers of diverse classrooms can address and teach their students in ways that enhance equal opportunities to identify with learning in school. First, by means of student interviews the following research question is examined: 'What learner identity positions foster the identification with learning in school of students with diverse trajectories of learning and learner identity development?'. Two learner identity positions are identified to help diverse student to identify with learning in school, namely the positions of 'people who are getting better prepared for their envisioned participation in society' and 'people who learn in accordance with their own (perceived) abilities'. Subsequently, based on the classroom observation data the question 'What teaching practices can already be found in formal education to convey these learner identity positions?' is addressed. Teaching practices that were found to integrate adolescents' out-of-school knowledge and experiences into the formal curriculum are discussed, as well as teaching practices that appreciate, support and demand students' efforts while acknowledging students' diverse abilities.

Finally, chapter 6 contains a general discussion in which the main findings of the four studies are brought together. Also, the scientific contribution and practical implications of the thesis are discussed. Additionally, directions for future research are presented.