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Learner identity development in school and beyond

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CHAPTER 6

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present thesis was concerned with adolescents' learner identities and how the development of their learner identities can be supported. Learner identities regard people's self-understandings as learners (e.g., as someone who is very eager to learn, as someone who tends to quit learning when a task is perceived to be too difficult, or as someone who perhaps enjoys learning economics, while disliking to learn how to draw). Such self-understandings are developed in relation to previous engagements in learning experiences and inform adolescents' current and future learning engagements. They inform the extent to which and how adolescents engage in the various learning experiences they sought out for themselves or are obliged to engage in (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Pollard & Filer, 2007). This means that the learner identities that adolescents develop also inform their engagement in school (Calabrese Barton, Kang, Tan, O'Neill, Bautista-Guerra, & Brecklin, 2013; Mortimer, Wortham, & Allard, 2010; Rubin, 2007). For example, research suggests that when adolescents come to understand themselves as learners who can never meet their school's expectations, they may come to invest little time and energy into their formal education (Boaler & Staples, 2008; Gresalfi, 2004). As concerns have recently been raised about the relatively low levels of school engagement of adolescents in Dutch secondary education (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2019; OECD, 2016, 2017), it is important to better understand adolescents' learner identity development. This is why the present thesis tried to advance insight into how adolescents' learner identities develop, and how this development can be supported.

Extant research already provided insights into what learning experiences in school may cause adolescents to develop learner identities that impede their school engagement (e.g., Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Rubin, 2007). Yet, not much research had been performed on how adolescents' learner identity development can be supported in schools in such a way that their school engagement is fostered. Limited attention can be found for adolescents' learner

identities too in daily educational practice. Adolescents' 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). Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that students may struggle to engage in their education when they cannot relate their out-of-school experiences to what is taught in school (Anderson, 2007; Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Rubin, 2007; Seaton, 2007; Willis, 1977). Additionally, indications can be found that, in trying to foster adolescents' school engagement, it should be acknowledged that their learner identities do not only develop in relation to learning experiences in school, but in relation to learning experiences in out-of-school contexts too (also see Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Pollard & Filer, 2007). Adolescents may for example be stimulated in school to develop their creativity, while their parents may consider this a waste of time, or vice versa. Such a discontinuity between the context of school and an out-of-school context like home or a peer group, may impede adolescents' school engagement. Continuities between school and out-of-school contexts, however, are generally found to foster adolescents' school engagement (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999).

To date, it had remained unclear through what mechanisms continuities and discontinuities inform adolescents' school engagement. Research with a learner identity focus may improve our understanding of such processes, as it connects adolescents' various learning experiences to their learning engagements by means of their self-understandings as learners. Thus far, however, learner identity research has not taken the role that learning experiences in out-of-school contexts play in adolescents' learner identity development into account (e.g., Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Rubin, 2007). To provide further insights into the role that the different contexts adolescents participate in play in their learner identity development and school engagement, the following overarching research question was studied in the explorative research project that was presented in this thesis: 'What role do continuities and discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts that adolescents participate in play in their learner identity development?'. In examining this research question, the focus was particularly on (dis-)continuities that concerned either one of two (or sometimes both) related phenomena: the learner identity positions or the learning notions that adolescents encountered in different contexts. Of these, the former concern the social roles as learners that are available in a particular context (e.g., the creative learner, the fast learner, the disruptive

student). The latter concern ideas about learning, such as what the purpose of learning things is and what legitimate ways to achieve learning goals are. It is specifically in relation to these phenomena that adolescents develop their learner identities (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Pollard & Filer, 2007). In total, four separate studies were conducted to answer the research question presented above. Below, a brief summary of each of these studies and their main findings are presented.

MAIN FINDINGS

The Role of School in Adolescents' Identity Development

At the start of the research project it was studied what insights the existing literature already provided into the role of educational processes in adolescents' personal, social, and school- and learning-related identity development. This was done by means of a systematic literature review of 111 scientific publications that is reported upon in Chapter 2. A first finding that was identified concerned the various ways in which schools, teachers and peers can unintentionally (and often negatively) inform adolescents' identity development through the so-called hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968): selection practices and differentiation, teaching strategies, teacher expectations, and peer norms were found to often implicitly communicate messages to students about who they are, should be, and can be. In this way, these educational processes impact with what learning-related activities and goals adolescents can and want to identify. Research on how schools and teachers could intentionally support adolescents' identity development was found to be rather scarce. Most studies on this topic were situated in after-school clubs, extracurricular classes provided at school, or at summer camps. These studies suggest that, to support adolescents' identity development, they can be stimulated to explore new learning contents, learning activities and social roles as learners (e.g., as a co-teacher) that they may identify with through in-breadth exploration. Additionally, adolescents can be invited to explore and further specify already existing self-understandings and identifications through in-depth exploration: apart from the fact that they enjoy, for example, engaging in history classes, they may come to discover what aspects of history education they are most interested in. Alternatively, schools and teachers can foster adolescents' understandings of their own thoughts and feelings and how these came to be through reflective explorative learning experiences. This may support them

to gain insights into who they currently are and into who they want to become. Finally, the reviewed literature suggested that learning experiences should be situated in supportive classroom climates and should be considered meaningful to effectively support adolescents' identity development. More specifically, it was found that engaging students in explorative learning experiences should be done in ways that appeal to their out-of-school knowledge and experiences as this was demonstrated to stimulate adolescents to engage in learning, also about themselves as learners.

Contextual (Dis-)continuities in Learning Notions and Adolescents' Learner Identities

Next, Chapter 3 presented a study that aimed to gain an understanding of how continuities and discontinuities in learning notions between the context of school on the one hand, and the contexts of home, peer groups, work, and leisure institutes on the other, inform adolescents' school engagement through their self-understandings as learners in school. Interviews with fifteen students with diverse levels of school engagement (these were referred to as highly, moderately or hardly engaged students) were performed to examine two research questions. The first research question was 'What continuities and discontinuities in learning notions are encountered by adolescents with diverse levels of school engagement?'. In the analysis, no differences between students with diverse levels of school engagement were found in the (dis-)continuities they experienced between school on the one hand, and their work and leisure contexts on the other. Hence, the continuities and discontinuities that they did encounter between these contexts did not appear to inform their school engagement. However, when it comes to the context of school on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other, the analysis showed that all highly engaged students encountered a seemingly important continuity between these contexts in ideas about being a good learner in school: all of their teachers, parents and peers considered putting an effort into school to be a typical feature of a good learner, sometimes next to getting good school results. Additionally, these students thought that all their friends, teachers and parents, found it important that they were good learners in school. The other students reported that their parents or teachers did not always value the time and energy they invested in school as much. Also, these students often had at least some friends who were not very dedicated to school. Additionally, one student was interviewed who was

hardly engaged in school. What was characteristic for this student was that he was even unable to tell what features of a good learner would be according to his teachers and parents. This student also was one of the few students who exclusively had friends who did not find it important to be good learners in school. Together, these findings provided first indications that (dis-)continuities regarding notions of a good learner between the school context on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other do inform students' learner identities.

The second research question concerned 'What relations can be found between the contextual continuities and discontinuities in learning notions adolescents with diverse levels of school engagement encountered, and their learner identities?'. First, it was found that the lack of interest of the hardly engaged student mentioned above in his parents' and teachers' learning notions appeared to be related to his learner identity. This student reported that he no longer cared about learning in school as his diagnosed adhd and dyslexia would not allow him to be a competent student anyway. As no students who demonstrated moderate or high levels of school engagement had mentioned the complete absence of feasible expectations, the analysis suggested that the absence or presence of feasible expectations is related to adolescents' learner identities. Next, some of the moderately and none of the highly engaged students felt that either their parents or (some of their) teachers did not recognize their invested time and energy into school. Only these moderately engaged students reported to mainly care about engaging in classes they enjoyed. The interviews with these students indicated that they either did not feel requested to invest more time and energy into school or felt discouraged to do so because their efforts would not be recognized by some of the authoritative adults in their surroundings. Hence, the (non-)recognition of effort put into school appeared to be a second learning notion that was related to the adolescents' learner identities. Thirdly, it was found that pro- and/or anti-school peer norms were related to students' learner identities. For (exclusively hardly and moderately engaged) students who understood themselves as learners who did not care much about school and who sometimes put their opportunities to learn in school into jeopardy, a discontinuity was identified between their teachers and their befriended classmates when it comes to how important it was considered to be a good learner. The moderately engaged students who had friends and classmates who conveyed pro-school peer norms regarding the importance of being a good learner and friends and classmates who did not (respectively forming a continuity or a discontinuity

with their teachers' and parents' learning notions) all understood themselves as students who engaged in school as long as they enjoyed the classes they were in. Highly engaged students who thought to have friends that had adopted pro-school peer norms, but a fair share of classmates who had not, reported to be driven by curiosity in some classes, and merely by the desire to obtain high grades or a certain degree in other classes. Only students who exclusively thought to have friends and classmates who had adopted pro-school peer norms, understood themselves as learners who were highly engaged on both an affective and behavioral level in all their classes. All in all, these findings indicate that continuities in learning notions about good learners between the school, home and peer group contexts reinforce adolescents' learner identities and therefore school engagement. In contrast, contextual discontinuities in these learning notions appear to require negotiation in terms of what learning notions should be identified with. This, in turn, may, like some continuities in learning notions (e.g., the absence of feasible expectations), cause adolescents to adopt suboptimal learner identities, at least from the schools' perspectives, and impede their school engagement.

Adolescents' Agency in Negotiating (Dis-)continuities to Pursue Their Learning Preferences

In Chapter 4 it was explored how the concept of learner identity could help to better understand why adolescents, when encountering (dis-)continuities, exercise their agency to engage with or disengage from school. To that end, a conceptual framework was presented that aimed to explicitly theorize when, how and why adolescents' would exercise their agency to constructively relate to discontinuities that could cause them to disengage from school. In total, the framework comprised three core concepts. The first one regards learning engagement, which is conceptualized as having an affective and behavioral component (also see Lawson & Lawson, 2013). The second concept regards learning preferences that are taken to reflect aspects of people's learner identities: learning preferences can be defined as the deep, long-term learning-related goals, values and beliefs people have already developed in relation to the affordances and constraints they have encountered (also see Azevedo, 2011). Such preferences are indicated by the reasons people have for engaging in or disengaging from certain learning experiences. They shed light on how participating in a particular context is personally relevant to them, and into why they engage in learning experiences in the way they do. Agency is the

third concept the presented framework includes, which is understood to involve people's pursuit of their preferences. Exercising agency, then, is understood to be indicated by people's use of locally available tools, norms, values and skills to pursue their preferences (also see Ecclestone, 2007; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011).

The framework holds that because of the affordances and constraints (e.g., learner identity positions and learning notions) adolescents encounter, they may find it relatively easy or hard to exercise their agency in a particular context; to satisfy multiple of their learning preferences there. Other contexts may be more affording of the pursuit of their preferences. Hence, contexts are understood to compete with each other in the extent to which they grant adolescents space to exercise their agency. This led to the following three premises. The first one is that adolescents exercise agency in the context of school when its affordances and constraints are perceived as considerably helpful (compared to other contexts) to pursue their learning preferences. This would reinforce relatively high levels of learning engagement in school. The second premise holds that adolescents may not exercise agency in school to pursue their learning preferences when they deem the school's affordances and constraints to make it relatively difficult for them to pursue those preferences. In such cases, adolescents will look at other contexts to satisfy their preferences, leading to school disengagement. The third premise is that, in interaction with new contexts or with changed affordances and constraints in already available out-of-school contexts, adolescents may come to adopt new learning preferences that cannot be easily pursued in school, which may also cause them to disengage from school. To illustrate how the framework may help to understand and study the role of adolescents' agency in their school (dis-)engagement, an exemplary case study of an adolescent who initially re-engaged in school, but disengaged from school later on in the schoolyear was presented.

Supporting Adolescents with Diverse Learning and Identity Development Trajectories to Engage in School

A study on how teachers of diverse classrooms can address and teach their students in ways that enhance equal opportunities to engage in school is presented in Chapter 5. The study that is reported on in this chapter departs from the premise that all adolescents' trajectories of learning and learner identity development differ from each other, which makes classrooms intrinsically diverse to at least a certain extent; all students bring different levels of

identification with different learning practices into the classroom (also see Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999). It is argued that schools should make learner identity positions available that all students can and want to identify with in order to provide inclusive education. Therefore, the study presented in this chapter aimed to gain insights into what learner identity positions foster the identification with learning in school of students with diverse trajectories of learning and learner identity development, and into how these learner identity positions can be conveyed.

By analyzing interviews with 22 students, two learner identity positions were distinguished that help diverse students to identify with learning in school. The first is the position of 'people who are getting better prepared for their envisioned participation in society'. Students with diverse trajectories of learning and learner identity development were found to find it easier and more enjoyable to engage in classes that are evidently of use to them personally: that are connected to their current learning interests *and* their future learning goals. The second position concerns 'people who learn in accordance with their own (perceived) abilities'. Students reported, irrespective of their trajectory of learning and learner identity development, that they tend to struggle to identify with learning in school when they feel they cannot learn anything new, when they deem the subject matter to be too difficult to understand, or when they do not deem the school's expectations to be accomplishable: they were looking for room for and recognition of their effort rather than for recognition of their achievements.

Next, classroom observation and student assessment and assignment data that was collected in ninth grade prevocational and pre-university classrooms of three schools that adopted different pedagogical approaches was analyzed. This was done to aim for variety in mapping through what different teaching practices the above mentioned learner identity positions were already made available to students in formal educational contexts. Two types of teaching practices were found to address students as people who are getting better prepared for their envisioned participation in society. The first type involved teachers trying to build connections between school and out-of-school contexts for the students. These teaching practices concern the provision of explicit explanations of the usefulness of the subject matter, engaging students in authentic learning experiences and the provision of generally relatable examples to explain or illustrate the taught subject matter. The second type comprised various ways to build connections between school and out-of-school contexts with the students. These practices concern the provision of

opportunities for students to bring in personally relevant topics during teacher-led plenary discussions or while working on school assignments. Additionally, various practices were identified that position students as learning in accordance with their own (perceived) abilities by either appreciating, supporting or expecting students' effort. First, through complimenting students on the effort they put into school, and valuing their not yet impeccable classroom contributions, students' invested time and energy was found to be appreciated. Second, by allowing students to ask questions in class, helping them identify their possible areas for improvement, and engaging them in multiple ability group work and a variety of classroom activities it was communicated to students that their effort was supported. Third, demanding students' focus in class conveyed to students that they were expected to work hard for school and learn in accordance with their own abilities.

SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION

The research field on learner identity is not the first to be concerned with the role of students' self-conceptions in their school engagement. Learner identity research is to a certain extent related to research fields on students' academic self-efficacy, academic self-concept, and possible selves. Adolescents' self-efficacies concern their convictions of whether or not they can successfully perform given academic tasks at designated levels (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Academic self-concept can be defined as people's more general perceptions of themselves in academic achievement situations regarding, for example, whether they experience their schoolwork to be easy or the extent to which they feel they have always done well in a particular class (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Possible selves "represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Some overlap between each of these constructs and the concept of learner identity is evidently present. Yet, while the research fields on students' academic self-efficacy, academic self-concept and possible selves provide valuable insights, a learner identity perspective contributes to how the relation between students' self-understandings and their school engagement can be understood and studied in various ways. Two of these are discussed below.

Research on academic self-efficacies, academic self-concepts and possible selves tends to be especially concerned with the effects of these constructs on outcomes such as adolescents' motivation, goal-related actions and academic

achievement (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). When it is examined what factors influence the development of a person's academic self-efficacy, academic self-concept, or possible selves, the focus is typically on quantifiable characteristics such as academic achievements (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008), the extent to which the school a person attends is a high-ability school or not (e.g., Marsh, 1987), or demographic characteristics (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). However, these studies provide limited insights into how the development of adolescents' academic self-efficacy, academic self-concepts and possible selves can be supported in school in ways that reinforce their school engagement. Because of its development-oriented focus, a learner identity perspective can add to these research fields as it draws attention to how daily interactions in sociocultural contexts such as schools, that afford some learning experiences but constrain others, inform how adolescents come to think of themselves as learners (also see Volman, 2015).

Second, scholars examining academic self-efficacies, academic self-concepts and possible selves generally understand these phenomena to be domain- or even task-specific and inherently tied to the domain of formal education (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Markus & Nurius, 1986). The construct of learner identity is, in contrast, practice-centered. People are thought to develop a coherent sense of themselves as learners by engaging in various learning practices in all sorts of learning contexts, including the contexts of schools and classrooms, but also the contexts of, for example, home, work and sports. A learner identity perspective therefore proposes a more holistic approach (Volman, 2015). This helps to explain certain patterns in school engagement levels that point to educational inequalities between students with and without backgrounds that are generally underrepresented in higher education (e.g., adolescents from migrant or lower socioeconomic backgrounds; Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016). Compared to research on academic self-efficacies, academic self-concepts and possible selves, learner identity research more explicitly invites us to take a critical approach and to question the legitimacy of school's ideas about learning. Similar to funds of knowledge and funds of identity research (Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Hogg, 2011; Moll et al., 1992) the key premise of learner identity research is that all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, are competent in certain ways. These competences may, however, be valued to a greater or lesser extent in school: it draws attention to the role of contextual continuities and discontinuities in adolescents' school engagement.

Apart from aiming to contribute to other research fields that are concerned with how students' self-conceptions inform their school engagement, the present thesis also tried to build on extant learner identity research in three ways. First, learner identity research had already demonstrated that when adolescents experience a discrepancy between their own ideas of how and what they can and want to learn on the one hand, and their school's ideas about learning on the other, this could cause them to disengage from their education (e.g., Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Rubin, 2007; Mortimer et al., 2010). As learning and learner identity development are intertwined, this suggests that when adolescents' out-of-school experiences remain unrecognized in school, this may prevent them to engage in school. Yet, learner identity research had mainly been concerned with what affordances and constraints for learning and learner identity development can be found in schools (Boaler & Staples, 2008; Gresalfi, 2004; Horn, 2008; Rubin, 2007). Only a few studies were concerned with how students develop learner identities in relation to the contextual discontinuities they encounter between out-of-school contexts and the larger context of school (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Vetter, Fairbanks, & Ariail, 2011). These studies, however, regarded small-scale research that merely concerned one or two students. Therefore, they provide more limited insights into how various types of continuities and discontinuities inform the levels of school engagement of different adolescents through their learner identities than the present thesis. Second, various studies had indeed shown that (dis)continuities between the school context on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other informed adolescents' school engagement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Noyes, 2006; Phelan et al., 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; Willis, 1977). However, these studies did not take the role of (dis-)continuities between school contexts and the contexts of work and leisure institutes into account, even though these are important contexts where adolescents learn and spend a lot of their time too. Furthermore, these studies identified a relation between (dis-)continuities in learning notions and adolescents' school engagement, but without explaining exactly how continuities and discontinuities inform adolescents' school engagement. Third, it had remained underexposed how continuities can be fostered in formal education in a way that is inclusive of adolescents' diverse trajectories of learning and learner identity development. Most research that is focused on how continuities can be fostered was situated in extracurricular settings, or perhaps exclusively in formal science or mathematics classrooms (see Basu, Calabrese Barton, Clairmont, & Locke, 2009; Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2009, 2018; Polman & Hope, 2014 for an exception).

Therefore, this thesis aimed to study adolescents' learner identity development while acknowledging a wider range of contexts that may play a role in adolescents' learner identity development; while examining how the learning experiences that are afforded and constrained in various contexts may inform adolescents' learner identity development; and by examining what this means for how schools and teachers can foster adolescents' school engagement in an inclusive way.

The research project presented in this dissertation provides further empirical support for the need to consider both adolescents' experiences in out-of-school contexts and their learner identities in understanding and studying their school engagement. It was found in Chapter 3 that especially (dis-)continuities between the context of school on the one hand, and the context of home and peer groups on the other in learning notions regarding a good learner in school may inform adolescents' school engagement. Contextual continuities in these notions seem to reinforce adolescents' identification with these notions as well as their level of school engagement. Contextual discontinuities in learning notions regarding a good learner in school appear to require negotiation in adolescents' development of coherent learner identities which may impede their school engagement. In addition, Chapter 4 suggests that other contexts like work that, in the students' view, serve similar purposes (such as the building of a stable life) as the context of school but offer different learner identity positions, may impede adolescents' school engagement too. More in general, the conceptual framework presented in this chapter draws attention to how contexts may compete with each other when it comes to the extent to which they grant adolescents space to exercise their agency; to pursue their learning preferences that reflect aspects of their learner identities. Finally, the study presented in Chapter 5 provides preliminary insights into how the school engagement of adolescents with diverse trajectories of learning and learner identity development can be fostered in school in an inclusive way. This study indicates that this can be achieved by positioning adolescents as people who are getting better prepared for their envisioned participation in society and as people who learn in accordance with their own (perceived) abilities, as these seem to be learner identity positions that a diverse student population can and wants to identify with.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This thesis reinforces the earlier finding that adolescents come to know more about themselves through learning, for example in terms of what it is they can and want to learn, and how this relates to their already present learning-related goals, values and beliefs (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Olitsky, Flohr, Gardner, & Billups, 2010; Rubin, 2007). Adolescents are, like all of us, learning selves. School is an important context in which adolescents' learner identity development can be supported, preferably in ways that fosters their school engagement. The research project presented in this dissertation stresses that, to support adolescents' learner identity development in an inclusive manner, it should be acknowledged that adolescents differ in the identifications with learning practices and the (perceived) abilities that they bring into the classroom. Due to the differences in the sets of learning experiences each adolescent engages in, adolescents' trajectories of learning and learner identity development differ from each other to at least a certain extent. Hence, classrooms need to be understood as contexts that are intrinsically diverse (also see, e.g., Gutiérrez et al., 1999b). Rather than adopting a deficit view and blaming the disengagement of certain students on deficiencies relating to these students themselves, this thesis invites schools and teachers to critically reflect upon how they could help students, especially those who struggle to relate to their education, to develop self-understandings as learners that foster their school engagement: how they can provide education that is inclusive of students' diverse trajectories of learning and learner identity development.

What the research project presented in this dissertation first and foremost suggests is that this requires the provision of meaningful education: education that allows students to relate what they learn in school to aspects of their out-of-school lives that are personally relevant to them, and vice versa (Esteban-Guitart, & Moll, 2014; Gutiérrez et al., 1999b; Hogg & Volman, 2020). This does not mean that schools and teachers should no longer be expected to introduce adolescents to new ideas, activities and possibilities. Rather, it means that this should be done in ways that stimulate adolescents to connect what they are taught in school to who they are and want to be (Biesta, 2014; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). The present thesis suggests that this can be achieved by organizing meaningful education for or with students.

With respect to organizing meaningful education for students, the studies in this dissertation for example indicate that an important teaching practice to achieve this aim concerns the provision of compelling explanations of why it is important to learn the things that are taught in school: to make students

experience the usefulness of, for example, learning about the differences between plants and animals, also when they are not interested in biology and are sure that they will never pursue a biology-related hobby or career (see, e.g., Gebre & Polman, 2020); or to convince them of the importance of a history class even when they feel 'it is all in the past' or 'does not regard them' and is therefore irrelevant (see, e.g., Savenije, Van Boxtel, & Grever, 2014). Surprisingly, the provision of such explanations were hardly found in the classroom observation data that was analyzed for this thesis. This either implies that teachers may not yet be that concerned with or aware of the diversity in learner identities that can be found among their students, or that it is unclear to the teachers too why they teach the things they teach to a diverse group of students. Either way, it appears to explain the disengagement of a fair share of students. Here, it should be stressed that organizing meaningful education for students does not have to be an extra task for teachers and schools. Rather, it requires the adoption of a pedagogical approach that helps adolescents see the connections between their school and out-of-school lives (Biesta, 2014; Vianna and Stetsenko, 2011).

When it comes to organizing meaningful education with students, it can also be derived from the present thesis that this for example can be achieved by providing students with certain degrees of freedom: by assigning them a topic but allowing them to choose what type of assignment they want to engage in to cover this topic, or by providing them with a given assignment, yet leaving the topic to which it is applied up to them. This was something that was observed more often in the analyses that were performed for this thesis. What appears to be key here too (also with respect to other teaching practices; see Chapter 5) is that adolescents can understand themselves as learners who are getting better prepared in school for their envisioned way to participate in society.

Apart from the fact that students differ in what they personally deem relevant to learn, they also differ in the abilities they (perceive to) have. When adolescents feel that they cannot meet their teachers' expectations or that they cannot learn anything new in school, this may cause them to disengage from school too (Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Gresalfi, 2004; Legette, 2017). The studies in this dissertation suggest that, when schools and teachers want to support adolescents' learner identity development in ways that foster their school engagement, it is important to convey to all students that they are supported to learn in accordance with their own abilities. This first means that the time and energy that students invest in their education, rather than their test

scores, should be recognized and appreciated. In this way, all students are stimulated to keep on learning in school even when they might not master or already have mastered the curriculum well enough to pass a test. It also means that the effort adolescents put into school should not only be appreciated, but also supported. Students who struggle with the curriculum can for example be invited to keep asking questions and they can be supported in identifying what knowledge and skills they can improve and how. Students who find the curriculum not challenging enough can be challenged in different ways, for example by inviting them to learn about project management or practice their collaboration skills when they are already familiar with the other types of knowledge and skills that are taught in a specific class. By positioning students as people who learn in accordance with their own (perceived) abilities and as people who are getting better prepared for their envisioned participation in society they all, irrespective of their trajectories of learning and learner identity development, receive recognition in school of who they are, what they know and what they are capable which was found to foster their identification with learning in school.

Even when adolescents are positioned in school as people who are getting better prepared for their envisioned participation in society and as people who learn in accordance with their own (perceived) abilities, they may still encounter certain discontinuities that the strategies discussed above (e.g., providing them with certain degrees of freedom, supporting their effort) may not help to bridge. Based on the research project presented in this thesis, discontinuities between the contexts of school and home deserve schools' attention as it was found that when adolescents' parents only define school success by means of adolescents' achievements, this can disengage them from their education. It may prevent students from wanting to understand themselves as learners who invest a lot of time and energy into school: either by allowing them to be 'lazy' when they already get good grades, or by robbing them of opportunities to make their parents proud. From this it follows that schools and teachers should not only themselves try to convey to students that their invested time and energy in school is recognized and appreciated, but to convince parents to do so too.

Some parents may not be susceptible for such persuasions, though. This presents students with a challenging discontinuity that simply cannot be overcome. This thesis suggests that in such instances, teachers can help students to relate to this discontinuity in a way that does not impede their school engagement. Here, reflective explorative learning experiences can be of use.

Stimulating self-reflection—for example by engaging students in (internal) dialogues on the importance and implications of what they learn in school (Sinai, Kaplan, & Flum, 2012)—allows adolescents to better understand their own thoughts and feelings (Choi, 2009). It can help them to become more aware of their assumptions, to gain more insights into who they currently are as learners, and into who they want to become and what is needed to get there. Furthermore, reflective explorative learning experiences may foster adolescents' understanding of how their learner identity development is influenced by their social surroundings: it supports them in making their own decisions and to make certain learner identity commitments irrespective of how other people may feel about it (Hardee & Reyelt, 2009; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). This cannot only make adolescents resilient to some school engagement impeding convictions their parents may have, but also to anti-school norms that may be conveyed by peers who do not find it important to be good learners in school. It requires, though, that adolescents can and want to identify with the learning experiences that are organized in school: it requires meaningful learning experiences that match their own (perceived) abilities.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research project performed for this dissertation was explorative in nature. Therefore, this thesis mainly contributes to conceptualizations of the role that continuities and discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts play in adolescents' learner identity development. Future research may help to explore the generalizability of some of this thesis's research findings. Fairly strong indications were found that some discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts can be overcome by the organization of meaningful learning experiences in school that recognize adolescents' diverse sets of skills and knowledge. When students are addressed as people who are getting better prepared for their envisioned participation in society and as people who learn in accordance with their own (perceived) abilities, this may foster their identification with learning in school. What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which students recognize that these learner identity positions are available to them. Future studies may help examine what teaching practices are especially effective in conveying these learner identity positions to students and when. Questions that may for example be studied are: Are consequential authentic learning experiences more effective in positioning adolescents as people who are getting better prepared for their envisioned

participation in society than ones that do not directly impact adolescents and/or their communities? And under what conditions can multiple ability group work effectively convey to students with diverse trajectories of learning and learner identity development that they are allowed to learn in accordance with their (perceived) abilities? Here, it should be taken into account that the effective practices that are identified by the literature on extracurricular and out-of-school settings (e.g., engaging students in hands-on and on-site learning experiences; also see Chapter 2) may not simply be transferable to formal school settings. This is why more research, for instance involving classroom interventions, is needed to further determine and develop teaching practices that effectively communicate to students that they are getting better prepared for their envisioned participation in society and that they can learn in accordance with their own (perceived) abilities.

The research project presented in this dissertation shows that adolescents may also encounter discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts that may be especially hard to overcome. This is for example the case when parents and teachers have different and rather fixed ideas about what behavior or achievements characterize a good learner in school. To learn more about how the learner identity development of adolescents who experience such discontinuities can be supported in ways that foster their school engagement, it is important to gain more insights into how adolescents' learner identities develop over time. The studies that are included in this dissertation show that adolescents already have made certain learner identity commitments: they already have some sense of what they are interested in, what their talents are, how they prefer to learn new things and perhaps even what careers they want to pursue. When we would know more about what learning experiences and the recognition of what other people (e.g., parents, peers) may have caused adolescents to commit to these identifications, this would advance knowledge on how adolescents engage in learner identity exploration and commitment. Consequently, insights could be provided into how schools and teachers can constructively support the learner identity development of adolescents who encounter certain discontinuities that may be challenging to overcome.

Next, especially little is still known about the learner identity development of adolescents who are moderately to hardly engaged in school. To recruit students for the first round of interviews for this research project, I, the author, asked students if they would mind talking to me about their experiences in school for about 45 minutes after class or during a break. These requests were made after I thought I had established rapport with them: after I had

introduced myself at the beginning of the school year, had spent several weeks walking around in their schools and observing their classes, and had engaged in various informal conversations with them. Furthermore, when I invited students for the interviews, I stressed that the main goal of the project was to improve the education provided in school, to make learning in school more enjoyable and engaging. I had hoped that this would persuade moderately to hardly engaged students too to participate in the research projects as I thought that they would probably have strong opinions about what should be changed about the formal curriculum and why. However, I turned out to be wrong. Students who demonstrated to be moderately engaged and especially students who demonstrated to be hardly engaged often declined my request to be interviewed, also after I explained to them that they could participate anonymously and were free to withdraw from the study at any point. The reasons why they declined, though, often remained unclear. Perhaps they did not have as many opinions about learning in school as I thought. Perhaps they did not feel the need to make school more engaging. Perhaps, though, I unrightfully assumed that the students knew they (sometimes) disengaged from school because there was something wrong with the curriculum rather than with them. It is possible that the students did blame their own levels of school engagement on themselves, which might have made it too painful for them to share their school experiences with me. More one-on-one chats may have been needed to make clear to them that I could be trusted and that I had good intentions. After all, school may have been a hostile environment for them. Moreover, as they knew I worked for a university they probably also knew I was highly educated, which may not have helped them to feel at ease around me. Hence, what researchers can probably best take from this for future research is that moderately to hardly engaged students may require a more extensive establishment of rapport: they may require the building of a warm social relationship so that trust can emerge (also see Basset, Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepcevic, & Chapman, 2008).

Additionally, in this thesis, the role that (dis-)continuities between school and out-of-school contexts play in adolescents' learner identity development has primarily been studied from the perspectives of adolescents themselves. A benefit of such an approach is that students' voices are acknowledged. Moreover, this was in line with the adopted understanding that people tell others and themselves who they are as learners through narratives, and develop and maintain their learner identities in relation to their *own* experiences of the different contextual affordances and constraints that they encounter.

Such experiences, like their learner identities, were therefore deemed to be accessed best through adolescents' own accounts (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). However, future research could further contribute to the research field by observing the learning engagement of adolescents in their out-of-school contexts too. Especially when such observations are combined with interviews with teachers, parents, peers and, for example, coaches, additional affordances and constraints that possibly inform adolescents' learner identities may be identified and addressed in student interviews. In this way, an even more comprehensive picture of the role of continuities and discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts in adolescents' learner identity development can be developed.

Finally, the literature review presented in Chapter 2 already demonstrated how insights into adolescents' (learner) identity development may be deepened when this process is studied from different angles. While foregrounding a sociocultural perspective this thesis project was attentive to key concepts from other perspectives on adolescents' (learner) identity development too. Although perhaps somewhat implicitly, the study presented in Chapter 4 was considerate of identity exploration and commitment as key processes in adolescents' learner identity development. These psychosocial concepts drew attention to how an adolescent's exploration of new learning notions and learner identity positions at for example work, changed her identity commitments as a learner in school. This applies to the study presented in Chapter 5 too, as this study stresses that the learner identity commitments that adolescents have already made should be acknowledged in trying to persuade them to engage in exploring additional learning notions and learner identity positions; in trying to persuade them to learn new things in school. Researchers who adopt social psychological perspectives stress the role of adolescents' identification with social groups in their (learner) identity development, and scholars who approach the issue of identity development from a sociological perspective are generally concerned with processes of inclusion, exclusion and the role of students' agency. This was taken into account by considering the different social groups (e.g., students from particular backgrounds) each research participant belonged to, and acknowledging that the affordances and constraints of one context may compete with those of other contexts in the pursuit of adolescents' learning preferences. It is contended that combining the insights from these various perspectives fosters the building of a knowledge base on adolescents' learner identity development that is as

comprehensive and robust as possible. Therefore, researchers who intend to study adolescents' learner identities in the future, are stimulated to do so by crossing the boundaries of various these various disciplines and theoretical traditions as well.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

The affordances and constraints in school impact the learner identity positions and learning notions in relation to which adolescents can develop their learner identities. These positions and notions may or may not be as prevalent and valued in adolescents' out-of-school contexts, leading to continuities or discontinuities, respectively. The research presented in this dissertation suggests that continuities and discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts play an important role in adolescents' learner identity development and therefore in their school engagement. Support for this was especially found when it comes to (dis-)continuities between the context of school on the one hand, and the contexts of home and peer groups on the other. In addition, the results indicate that (dis-)continuities between school and work may inform adolescents' learner identities too. Continuities between school on the one hand, and the contexts of home, peer groups and work on the other, reinforce adolescents' school engagement through their learner identities. Dependent on the type of continuity, continuities generally inform adolescents' school engagement in positive (e.g., when everyone stimulates an adolescent to invest in school), but sometimes negative (when no one does so) ways. In contrast, discontinuities between these contexts require adolescents to negotiate the differences in learning notions and learner identity positions they encounter there into their rather coherent and stable self-understandings as learners. This dissertation suggests that this may cause adolescents to adopt suboptimal learner identities when it comes to their school engagement, particularly when the affordances and constraints in school provide them with relatively little room to pursue their personal learning preferences. Therefore, the role of continuities and discontinuities between school and out-of-school contexts in adolescents' learner identity development and school engagement should not be denied, neither by educational researchers nor by educational practitioners. Finally, the present thesis indicates that there are learner identity positions that allow all students, irrespective of their encountered continuities or discontinuities, to engage with learning in school. By positioning students in school as people who are getting prepared for their envisioned partici-

pation in society and as people who learn in accordance with their own abilities, equal opportunities to identify with learning in school may be enhanced so that more inclusive education can be provided.