

# Review of Children's Identity Construction via Narratives

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Understanding oneself is a fundamental human concern that starts early and continues throughout life. Identity construction is also a life-long process, but early childhood is the critical period for laying the foundation. Children's identity construction proceeds through diverse perspectives which do not necessarily follow developmental steps. These perspectives include how children view themselves in relation to others through narratives, and how they embody themselves in the peer interactions of peer group and school. Self-identity is changed and transformed through interactions with environment and diverse experiences. The various ways children construct their identities reveal their efforts to "become". Understanding who we are in early childhood opens the door to acknowledging ourselves as significant human beings.

*Keywords:* Identity, Narrative, Early Childhood Education

## Introduction

A child's personal identity is crucial, not only in individual development but also for positioning as a social being. In one sense, identity is regarded as the holding of history. It was once taken for granted that all persons had a "given" identity. The debate surrounding this issue today assumes that identity is not an inherent quality of a person, but that it arises through interaction with others and a focus on the processes by which identity is constructed. Identity is crucial in acknowledging who we are and in defining who we are as well. When we turn to the lives of children, early childhood has long been considered a critical time in the formation of self-esteem, self-identity, and self-concept (Sunal, 1990). In particular, self-identity has a social connotation, that is, it includes an awareness of being in group. The identity of children is a field that is investigated from perspectives that generate possibilities for new ways of seeing, doing, and being in the world. Early childhood is an important time for building self-worth, confidence, belief about self-ability, and belief about the anticipation and achievement of becoming a social being with a group. Therefore, knowing who they are and how to perceive themselves is the initial stage of "becoming" a process that spans a lifetime.

## Definition of Identity

"There is no such thing as a fixed, ready-made, finished self. Every living self causes acts and is itself caused in return by what it does. Our personal identity is found in the thread of continuous development which binds together these changes. In the strictest sense, it is impossible for the self to stand still; it is becoming, and becoming for the better or the worse." (John Dewey, *Ethics*, 1932, cited in Graham, 1991: p. 44)

Broadly speaking, identity is our understanding of who we are. Theoretically, the concept of identity involves similarity and difference (Ricoeur, 1992), identity is the way we relate to and distinguish between individuals and groups in their social relations and with other individuals or groups. This is distinguished from the differences grasped both between and within entities, each being understood as a multiple presence. It gives us an idea of who we are and how we relate to others and to the

world in which we live. Identity is presence, not so much as something already present, but rather as a production in the throes of being.

Postmodern and sociocultural theories have stressed the importance of exploring situated discursive practices in the construction of identity, rather than seeing identity as reflecting essential aspects of human behavior. "Identity" is a continuous evoking of self-understanding. Lacan's "ego" seeks identity as a unified "me" or, in other words, sees itself in the face of the "Other". "I" emerges in the presence and reflection of another, which means identity is linked to someone else. Therefore, in terms of constituting "self", identity requires not only self-judgment about being, but also the influence of others.

"Identity formation is conceived as an ongoing process that involves the interpretation, and reinterpretation of experiences as one lives through them." (Kerby, 1991)

As noted above, the definition of identity can be understood as an ongoing process. The field of early childhood education currently views identity as hierarchically tied to developmental psychology and its accompanying constructions of children and early education. In an attempt to move beyond current understanding, this essay seeks to provide a new, broader road to the world of children. Identities can never be unified and fixed; they are always in flux, always multiple, and continually under construction. No matter what the context, we are continually engaged in becoming "something" of "someone".

## Children's Identity Construction through Narratives

### Review of Narratives in Early Childhood Education

Who we are and how we come to see ourselves is increasingly viewed as the ongoing and ever-changing story we tell about our lives. Children encounter and use narratives in a variety of ways, for instance, telling and retelling personal experiences (Miller & Mehler, 1994), creating stories in play and social experiences (Chang, 1998; Kyrtzizis, 1999), reading and listening to stories through literature (Bettelheim, 1976), and reading and writing and using and encountering narratives in texts where narrative is used to explain an event, idea, or some

phenomena. Giroux (1987) also points out how an individual's stories, memories, narratives, and readings of the world are inextricably related to wider social and cultural formation and categories.

Narrative constitutes a means of organizing one's self interpersonally. The representation of events in narrative discourse allows experience to become internalized and owned. The ongoing stories that children create about themselves are embedded within the social, familial, and cultural contexts within which development occurs. These stories serve not only as a venue for self-expression and communication with others, but also as a means of creating meaning out of lived experience. For children, storytelling or visual narrative is meaningful and, further to this, narratives read from literature are critical in their lives. Among the research concerning children's narratives and identity construction (Bettelheim, 1976; Chang, 1998; Kyrtzis, 1999; Miller & Mehler, 1994), Bettelheim's approach has special significance for it explores the meanings and importance of fairy tales. Through literary narratives (1976), children search for the answers to such questions as, "Who am I?" "How should I deal with such problems?" "What must I become?" As children develop, they learn step by step to understand themselves and, by doing so, become better able to understand others and eventually relate to them in ways which are mutually satisfying and meaningful. The deepest meaning will be different for each person, and also different for the same person depending on the moment.

Through fairy tales, children gain a feeling of selfhood and self-worth, and a sense of moral obligation, for these stories reveal children's conscious self so they can eventually cope with the unconscious. Fairy tales enrich children's lives and leave children feeling enchanted because they do not quite know how the stories have worked their wonder on them. The imaginative world experiences found in fairy tales offer a new avenue for children to restore meaning to their lives. This is an important device, for it makes obvious the fact that the fairy tales' purpose is to provide not only information about the external world, but also insight into the internal processes taking place within the individual.

Children's narratives play a role in constructing a self-concept that refers to one's idea of one's identity as distinct from others. Moreover, they are vital to understand children's world construction. A child's self-formation is then two-fold, involving first the becoming/constructing of self (individually and socially) and then revealing this self to the world. Children are natural storytellers in that they know how to shape thoughts and feelings. In telling, listening to, and reading stories, children transform experiences into original structures by crossing between reality and fantasy. Childhood is the time to learn to bridge the immense gap between inner experiences and the real world, and in these stories are messages about human experiences and how to deal with basic human predicaments. These messages help bridge the gap. As a result, through narratives, children have a chance of constructing an individual "being" who holds personal values, concepts, and perspectives. Self-construction, especially, occurs through the relation to the characters with in the stories. Furthermore, by helping to mold personality and establish a basis of identification, these stories encourage children to internalize individual values and transform into mature human beings.

### The Implications of Narratives in Constructing Children's Identity

Bakhtin (1981) argued that people become who they are

through communication, and the dialogue between voices constitutes context. To know how one constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs one's identity, we need to focus on personal narratives. One of the central purposes of narrative is to allow us to construct a narrative identity—both at the level of history and at the level of individual life. To understand children's identity construction, we need to pay attention to their narratives. Children weave life experiences into coherent stories, or narratives, in ways that reconstruct images of themselves and the groups or communities with which they affiliate. The stories we tell and hear are part and parcel of our becoming, and we embrace their meanings for our lives, both implicitly and explicitly. This is the notion that narrative somehow mediates between self and world, either evoking or simply creating order and meaning.

Ricoeur (1992) writes that stories offer us models for the re-description of the world. Narrative, the power of narrative, and ways of knowing and caring are tools for grasping the self in relation to the other. Narrative promotes self-identity through refiguration, configuration, and refiguration processes.

Regarding narrative and the construction of identity, Ricoeur (1992) sheds light on narrative as a process of identification. According to Ricoeur, identity is constructed with two different sides. On one side of identity is sameness (Latin, *idem*—character) and on the other side is selfhood (Latin, *ipse*—core of self). This selfhood is not sameness (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 116). Sameness is a concept of relation and a relation of relation. We acknowledge that selfhood identity covers a spectrum of meanings, from the pole where it overlaps with sameness identity to the opposite pole, where it is entirely distinct from the latter. Identity means interpretation of intersubjectivity between self and other.

Narrative identity in the conceptual constitution of personal identity in the manner of a specific mediator between the pole of character, where *idem* and *ipse* tend to coincide, and the pole of self-maintenance, where selfhood frees itself from sameness (Ricoeur, 1992: p. 119). That is, narrative identity discloses itself in the dialectic of selfhood and sameness. What is more, in the plural world, stories are key to understanding who we are. A life can be represented by a narrative and shared with others. Based on Arendt's (2000) perspective, our life is a narrative and that narrative is an action. According to Taylor, defining identity is always in dialogue with, and sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us (1989).

People use narratives to construct individual identities through personal storytelling and autobiography, and through reflections from reading literature, all processes that can be termed self-narration. The use of stories is productive in many ways: past and current version(s) of self are juxtaposed in ways that produced different layers of meaning, understanding, and reconstruction of identity. In this respect, narrative can be seen as an important activity in the process of identity construction and as a way of exploring how versions and reconstructions of the past shape and construct the present in that key area of identity construction, the interrelationship of past and present.

## Conclusion

Understanding oneself is a fundamental human concern that starts early and continues throughout life. The relationship between narrative and identity, we begin to use categories of appraisal that, traditionally, have been less readily tied to social science inquiry. Considering narrative depictions of identity are those such as "lifelikeness". Identity construction is also a life-

long process, but early childhood is the critical period for laying the foundation. Children's identity construction proceeds through diverse perspectives which do not necessarily follow developmental steps. The various ways children construct their identities reveal their efforts to "become". Understanding who we are in early childhood opens the door to acknowledging ourselves as significant human beings.

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