Students as co-researchers:
a participative action research on the construction of identity during adolescence

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Abstract

The formation of Identity during adolescence is a central developmental task. This article explores new ways of conducting collaborative research with adolescents to get a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the formation of a coherent, stable, and integrated identity, considering adolescents' perspective. This research, conducted with five adolescents highlights the interest in involving them as co-researchers to foster their social and emotional skills, strengthen relationships with adults at school, and show the importance of taking into account gender diversity among the various dimensions of identity.

Keywords

social and emotional skills, identity, children co-researchers, gender

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1 Introduction

Enhancing pupils' agency and fostering the social, emotional and civic skills that they need to thrive and succeed at school – and beyond – is one of the school's roles and responsibilities. An increasing number of institutions and international organizations such as OECD, UNESCO, European commission, etc. point out the necessity of transforming educational systems all over the world to meet the challenges that the current state of the planet present to us, and to promote a "humanistic, inclusive and cosmopolitan ideal of cultures, education and societies" (Malet 2021). However, there is still a lack of research on the various means to reach these goals. Moreover, teachers and educators often find themselves ill-equipped to handle this complex task, which they were not necessarily prepared for by their training.

The authors of this paper share the belief that pupils' voices need to be heard to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools and to implement the paradigm shift that is called for. As early as in 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underlined the importance of taking into account children's views on important matters affecting their lives, including judicial and administrative proceedings (article 12). This convention has marked a significant development in thinking about children (Twum-Danso, 2009). As pointed out by Flutter, Biddulph and Peacock (forthcoming), "the creation and expression of this democratic fellowship in education requires fundamental change in the roles of teacher and learner". This approach is in line with the "Student voice" movement that arose in the 1990s, aiming at promoting student engagement and success through a more active and meaningful involvement in shaping their learning environment.

One way to achieve this goal is to invite students to become "partners" in developing, enacting, and assessing educational approaches (Cook-Sather et al. 2010). Such a partnership can take different forms and can go as far as positioning students as "teacher educators" (Youens & Hall, 2006). One specific form of partnership is to include students to explore specific questions as co-researchers. Although the involvement of children in research is nothing new, the mode of involvement has evolved over recent decades, as pointed out by Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015), and a methodological shift took place with the development of participatory research: research is being conducted with and for children rather than on children (Camponovo et al. 2021). The

collaboration between researchers and other social actors (in this case, young people) at each step of the research process does not only contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge in the investigated field, but is also relevant to society. The process also affects the young co-researchers themselves, fostering their social and emotional development, self-efficacy, autonomy, awareness and acceptance of alterity (DeJonckheere et al. 2016).

This approach was chosen in Lab School Paris during the 2021–2022 school year to address adolescents' concerns about the construction of identity during adolescence. Although this project did not take place in the entire school level, but only with the students who felt concerned by this question, it was fully in line with the school's vision to promote democratic and participatory practices and to elicit students' voices. This article, co-authored by confirmed researchers and adolescent co-researchers, aims at providing a reflexive account of our actions throughout this collaborative research process. In the first part, we present the context and preliminary discussions that led to the research project; the second part outlines the various stages of its implementation. The third part gives an account of perspectives that such an approach opens up from the point of view of students, both in terms of self-development and inspiring school practices.

2 A safe space to share personal concerns and questions

The suggestion to start a discussion group came from the scientific director of the Lab School Paris and first author of this paper, Pascale Haag, following the observation that some students were preoccupied by social issues, specifically gender identity and sexual orientation. This was a new situation: Lab School Paris started as an elementary school in 2017 and has been growing along with its students, opening a new middle school level every year since 2018[1]. Paying attention to adolescents' questions and concerns, fostering their intellectual and emotional development was thus a new challenge to be addressed.

In order to create a safe space for discussions, where the students could express themselves without any fear of being judged or mocked, the founder of the school requested Leo, a graduate student in philosophy who was doing an internship ("service civique" in French) at the school to facilitate the group,

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[1] For more information on the Lab School Paris, where this project took place, see https://en.labschool.fr.

so that they could exchange ideas with a young adult who was neither one of their teachers, nor a member of the administration team of the school. Four students (13 to 15 years old) volunteered to participate, one more student joined the group at a later stage. The meetings took place during the lunch break. Leo describes his experience of the process as follows:

> "Being a philosopher, I was asked to lead discussions in order to make the students reflect on the issues that were of concern to them. The objective was not to give them dogmatic answers but to guide them in their reflections so that they could find answers to their questions by themselves. I therefore organized philosophical discussions during the first sessions, asking the teenagers to reflect on the concepts of "gender", "sexuality", "femininity", "masculinity", etc. I also introduced them to the thought of french philosopher and author, Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote in *Le Deuxième Sexe: "On ne naît pas femme on le devient"*, i.e. "One is not born a woman, but becomes one". I found it interesting to present the author's thoughts to the students so that they could have a first philosophical approach to these questions and realize that these issues have been written about on many occasions.
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> Following these first sessions, we realized that by questioning gender identity, other questions concerning the concept of identity in general and how it developed in adolescence emerged and we decided to study it in more depth. It was at this point that the Gender & Society discussion group became a research group on defining the construction of identity in adolescence. The philosophical discussion as a starting point of the research was interesting in several aspects: first, philosophy is a discipline of trial and error, of constant research, of questioning, so the parallel with the construction of identity can be made. Indeed, teenagers are also in this constant search of themselves, they can sometimes make mistakes, they can redefine themselves constantly, discover and be surprised by who they are. Thus, the method of philosophical thinking is close to the way we can discover ourselves. It was also a democratic practice as we were careful to maintain an environment where everyone expressed themselves freely while respecting each other, accepting differences and diverging opinions. It also helped the students to develop their critical thinking and ethical skills. In short, the use of philosophical discussion was a natural choice at the beginning of this research and served to highlight the students' questions while providing them with a curiosity conducive to research."[2]

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[2]   For a more in depth view of the "Gender and Society" discussion group, see https://en.lab school.fr/post/philosophical-discussion-as-a-starting-point-for-research

Weekly meetings went on until December 2021. In the beginning of 2022, Leo noted that the discussions were becoming less intense and wondered whether the meetings were still necessary. The students indeed seemed more comfortable talking about gender identity and sexual orientation at school and we asked them whether they would like to continue or not. The possibility of exploring this question further, and in a different way was suggested by Pascale. The undertaking of a research project involving the students as co-researcher would lead to a better understanding of what adolescents outside the research group, and outside the Lab School Paris, thought about these topics.

3 The study process

The same group began working on the research project in January 2022. First, the students were explained the research process and the different stages of research by Leo and Pascale also came to the first meetings. We found our research question to be about the different dimensions that came into play in the construction of identity during adolescence. We first thought about conducting a qualitative research through interviews of other adolescents outside the school, but then realized that, considering the time left of the school year, we wouldn't have time to fully analyze all interviews, if we were to conduct it on a medium to large scale. We therefore opted for a survey-based quantitative approach, which obviously scaled better than interviews.

For a few meetings after that, we brainstormed ideas of possible questions to include in the survey. We considered five dimensions of identity: "leisure activities", "political, social or environmental engagement", "religion", "cultural origin", and "gender and sexuality". We explored them and wrote some questions for each dimension. We then tested it on 26 of our classmates, to get feedback about the length of the survey, whether they felt uncomfortable answering any of the questions, etc. We modified the survey accordingly.

We published the questionnaire online in April. By mid-June, we had received about 300 answers, which allowed for preliminary analysis of the results to be performed. We first shared those results with our classmates during a student council, which gave us additional insight on what results seemed to be the most interesting to them.

On the 20th of June, we presented our first findings in a conference at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS, Paris). The

survey ran until the beginning of July when we got around 1,200 respondents. Presenting the results of this survey would go beyond the scope of this article, but this information can be found in Haag, Fantoni, and Dubal (forthcoming). In the following section, the students share their impressions and benefits of being associated as co-researcher in an actual research project.

4 Adolescents' perspectives: Why is such a project important for teenagers?

Students' voice being heard

"Throughout the meetings and research process, we found that being able to discuss these subjects involving identity with other teenagers was advantageous in multiple ways. Firstly, we were able to provide our perspective in the research process as co-researchers, rather than just being the subjects of the study. As adolescents, we find that many discussions about us do not include us, oftentimes because we are not taken seriously among many adults, in both online and in-person spaces. By being part of the brainstorming and research process, we were able to use our perspective as adolescents in this day and age to aid us, and were able to incorporate different questions we had about identity and adolescence into the study."

From the point of view of the research and the school pedagogical teams, although this pilot research project was not conducted during the school hours, it did affect the whole school culture in a positive way: at various stages of the research process, the progress was shared with the other students and teachers, e.g. all the students tested the questionnaire and gave feedback to the research team, preliminary results have been shared during school councils. As a result, students not only learned about the way a research project is conducted, but also became more aware of the various dimensions of their identity, in particular of gender identity and sexual orientation, and more open to diversity. This contributed to render our school more democratic and inclusive.

Addressing real-world questions

"Furthermore, seeing how different aspects of a scientific study works, such as the brainstorming, formulating, conducting, and analyzing processes, was quite interesting and educational."

Giving the students an opportunity to address a question that really concerns them, to make choices and take part of the responsibility for the project, including the dissemination of the results, is also beneficial both in terms of academic results and personal development: research shows that this can improve learning-related attitudes, self-efficacy and autonomy. As pointed out by Jacquez et al. (2020), "the integration of research and action that directly applies to their communities, the practice of critical problem solving, communication skills, teamwork and collaboration which leads to increased social support networks via school, teachers, and community stakeholders and then ultimately to community transformation"

Overcoming taboos

"It should be simple to talk about sexual orientation as a child. And it could be simple to talk about it as a parent. When parents discuss sexual orientation with children, this would be good if they spoke with comfort about gender diversity, and do not only evoke binary categories. If society accepted the idea that we could fall in love with a gender identical or of another kind or of several kinds. Gender stereotypes, like the idea that blue is inherently masculine or pink feminine should be limited, in order to allow all children who do not recognize themselves in the binarity to flourish"

In the framework of the "Gender and society" discussion group, the students had an opportunity to talk openly about their concerns, share their experience and realize that they were not alone. Opening up the discussions to a wider group during several sessions of the student councils also reinforced the sense of belonging and feeling accepted in the school. Moreover, realizing that these concerns are part of adolescent development, that questioning one's gender identity or sexual orientation is not only acceptable but legitimate, has opened the door for some students to address the matter with their families.

Inclusion

"Why would your sexual orientation make you different ? We are all part of the same group. It is normal to be homosexual or bisexual or heterosexual. Nobody should be excluded of a group because of their sexual orientation. Let's include everybody."

All the students clearly expressed the need to feel accepted regardless of gender or sexual orientation. This should be obvious, as gender equality and freedom from discriminations of any kind are at the very heart of human rights, and fundamental principles of the United Nations values. Nevertheless, some students encountered difficult situations in their previous schools or other environments and there is still a lot of work to be done in schools to re-think pedagogical attitudes towards gender and to take diversity in its wider sense into account[3].

Internalization of knowledge

"The meetings and discussions of this working group led to the internalization of facts known by certain members of the group but whose experience had not been appropriated. These discussions widened the field of reflection and questioning about adolescent identity." One example is talking about non binarity with others: experiencing it increased knowledge about it, and also having them sharing their experience of what it feels rendered the knowledge about it more 'concrete' or 'internalized'."

The discussions and the creation of a questionnaire helped the students to learn about themselves through others' experiences and in some cases to identify aspects of their identity that they felt in a diffuse way, without being able to put the right words to describe them. For some participants, the discussions also made them realize that they did not necessarily need to put a "label" on themselves, as it was not unusual not to know how to self-characterize one's gender (Richard, 2019) or not to be certain of one's sexual orientation. Forming one's identity is a lifelong process.

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[3]   Concrete examples of the Scandinavian approach to gender equality are presented by the researcher Gabrielle Richard in the following paper: https://theconversation.com/the-prob lem-with-snow-white-and-what-scandinavia-can-teach-us-about-it-70358

5 Conclusion

This action research conducted at the scale of a single class, with five adolescent co-researchers, has both strengths and limitations. In the framework of this paper, we have been focussing on the research process rather than on the results of the survey. One obvious limitation of this setting is the fact that some of the steps are not easily replicable without a researcher facilitating the process[4]. The setting could also be improved: due to the circumstances that gave birth to this project, it has been conducted outside school hours. For the student co-researchers, it has sometimes been frustrating to have so little time to work on the project. It would be relevant to integrate a research based project in the curriculum, involving all the students and teachers of various disciplines.

Despite these limitations, the feedback from the students indicated that this approach was promising and met the expectations of all the stakeholders involved in the process, whether adults or adolescents. The project was seen as an opportunity to develop new pedagogical approaches and to build more horizontal and collaborative relationships between adults and adolescents. Beyond a better understanding of who they are and who they are becoming, this project also opened new avenues to foster students' social and emotional skills at school.

The values and principles underlying this project are not new: since the end of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, pedagogues such as John Dewey, Célestin Freinet or Paolo Freire have endeavored, each in their own context, to make the classroom and the school "micro-societies", places where emancipation is achieved, and where democratic values are shared, taught and implemented. However, the challenge is still unresolved today: the OECD report on the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills (2021) points out that the ability of citizens to be adaptable, resourceful, respectful of others, and to take personal and collective responsibility is characteristic of a healthy functioning society, but notes that "the current landscape suggests that there is still a long way to go to achieve these goals..." (p. 47). The authors also emphasize that cooperation, empathy, and tolerance are essential for citizens and nations to achieve the goals of sustainable development, and to contribute effectively

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[4]   Toolkits are available for teachers who would like to undertake such a project: edugains.ca
    › newsite › studentVoice › student_researchers_toolkit.html

to the development of democratic institutions. Our project is intended as a modest contribution in this direction.

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