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Pupils' identities in some European contexts: An exploratory study in a UK and Belgian school

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Introduction

The European Commission has been promoting the creation of a European identity by using education as its main tool (CEC, 2001; EC, 2002). Education and training are seen to play 'an important role in building up social cohesion by preventing discrimination, exclusion, racism and xenophobia and hence in promoting the fundamental values shared by European societies, such as tolerance and the respect for human rights' (EC, 2002, p 9). The creation of a European identity or citizenship has been seen as a search for legitimacy of new and traditional political institutions (Garcia, 1993 and Ross, 1999) and as ´a parallel development of the construction of a European Union´ (Garcia, ibid, p 1). However, its formation is contested (Garcia, ibid; Macdonald, 1993 and Wintle, 1996).

There have been many arguments both for and against the promotion of a European identity. Those who favour such a pan-European identity have identified possible advantages. The combination of the multitude of cultures present in Europe can enhance the cultural heritage of each state, can aid for a better understanding of different cultures and help to construct a more tolerant European society (Garcia, 1993). It has been said that diversity can be represented as one of Europe's strengths. Critics of the construction of a pan-European identity (Coulby, 2000 and Warne, 2000) argue that the EU's initiatives tend to conflate 'Europe' with the EU itself and it fails to take account of colonialism and its consequences. Hence, Coulby sees it as a new form of nationalism (2000).

The issue of European identity is more topical than ever. The recent expansion of the European Union and the creation of a European Constitution are fundamental reasons for this relevancy. Due to the recent rise of xenophobia and right-wing parties across Europe, the EU is trying to re-invent and re-define European identity.

This study aims to illuminate how students construct national and European identities, examining the potential role of schooling in this, by comparing pupils in national and European schools in three countries. European Schools are institutions set up for the children of EU officials. They provide a multicultural and multilingual education and teachers are recruited from the national educational systems of each Member state.

This paper will discuss some of the aims of the project which are to:

- Explore 'European identity' in relation to educational policies and how students (aged 15-18) understand and feel about it;
- Examine the role of schooling in constructing **'**Europeanness';

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- Contribute to knowledge of the processes of the formation and sustenance of a European identity among young people, taking a social constructionist approach with particular emphasis on the intersection of 'gender', 'class' and national identities

A Social Constructionist approach to identity

My conceptual framework is that of social constructionism. I agree with the view that argues that social realities and indeed the self are socially and discursively created (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, Shotter, 1993, Gergen, 1999). This approach views people as having a multiplicity of fragmented and sometimes contradictory selves constantly 'in process' and undergoing 'transformation' (Hall, 1996). This study builds on Hall's conceptions of identities as shifting, fragmented, multiple, contingent and sometimes contradictory (e.g. Hall, 1992, 1996, 1997). My conceptual approach is based on the view that treats identities as unstable and changing entities constructed in relation to social structures such as gender, 'race', sexuality, class, dis/ability, etc.

The study

This paper draws on data from my PhD, which is a qualitative study where I use focus groups, paired, individual and Internet interviews and policy text analysis in a study of pupils, staff and policies in nine schools: six national[1] and three European[2] schools. The paper focuses on preliminary data from two schools (one national in London[3] and one European in Brussels[4]) and draws on:

- *Focus groups with nine pupils and paired interviews with four pupils*: two focus groups (London school) and two paired interviews[5] (Brussels school).

- *Individual (semi-structured) interviews with 13 pupils*: five to eight students in each school.

Nineteen pupils were selected according to the following criteria: a) aged between 15-18 years, b) studied in that school for at least five years, c) be EU national and d) be fluent in either English, Portuguese or French (due to my fluency in these languages and therefore ability to conduct the interviews) [6]. I have chosen to study this age group because at this age, youngsters have constructed their personal identities, they are more able to talk about them and they represent the future generation.

There is a large theoretical literature about European identities however, fairly little is known about the perceptions of young people in Europe and the processes by which young people understand themselves. Most existing studies of European identity focus on adults' perceptions of Europe and European identity by using quantitative methods. The present study adopts a qualitative perspective and focuses on young people because they are the voice of the future of Europe and the world.

A combination of a discourse analytic approach (Burr, 1995 and Burman and Parker, 1993) and a thematic analysis is used. The reason for this is that I believe people create, and are created, by the language they use while interacting with others. People construct

their world through language as they talk to each other. As Potter and Wetherell argue, the self is constructed through the 'different kinds of linguistic practices articulated now, in the past, historically and cross-culturally' (1987, p 102) and therefore, to analyse the self, one has to look at the everyday language, metaphor and analogy as well as the social context of self-discourse. After the transcription and coding of the interviews, I have identified key relationships, themes, discourses and differences within the data. The following discourses will be analysed: practical/rational discourses, culture discourses, self-other discourses and ideological discourses. Analysis and interpretation of data takes account of the context and circumstances in which the data was gathered (Robson, 2002).

Pupils' constructions of European identity

Young people in this study used various discourses in their construction of Europeanness. This paper will examine four of the discourses present in young people's talk. These are: practical/rational discourses, culture discourses, self-other discourses and ideological discourses. The paper will start by briefly examining the first three discourses and then it will examine in more depth the fourth discourse.

The findings indicate that pupils have different conceptions of what it means to be 'European'. Some of them admitted they could not define such a concept due to its abstractness. As one student put it: 'I couldn't define the word 'European'' (Bobby, British, London school). This student was particularly embarrassed by his lack of knowledge of what he considers a dominant discourse. In other words, he felt embarrassed because he could not define 'European' which he felt he was supposed to know. It can be argued then, that dominant discourses are not necessarily easy to define or characterise. They can seem 'obvious' at first sight but when asked directly about their meaning, its 'obviousness' turns out to abstractness and emptiness and this can lead to embarrassment such as the case of Bobby.

Practical/Rational discourses

European identity is being increasingly associated with the European Union (Garcia, 1993 and Woodward, 1999). Garcia argues the creation of a European identity 'is being seen as a parallel development to the construction of a European Union' (1993, p 2). In particular, being European is associated with EU membership. These themes were manifested in the young people's talk where they saw European Union membership as an important factor in being European. For example, this is evident in the following extract:

> We're European, as being in the EU. (Jessica, British, London school)

This political perspective is a rather exclusive European identity as it excludes those countries that are not Member States of the EU who are seen as non-European. Geographical criterion such as place of residence was important in perceiving Europeanness. For example, to live in Europe was sometimes enough to be considered European. Some students had an inclusive construction of Europeanness as they considered migrants living in Europe for a large amount of time as being European.

> It can be someone that has lived for 20 or 30 years and fell in love with Europe. (Jordi, Spanish, European School, Brussels)

Similarly, one student with the most inclusive perception of Europeanness said 'all immigrants living in Europe are European' (Sevastos, French, European School, Brussels). This observation contrasts with the view of a 'Fortress Europe' that some academics argue the European Union is trying to create in which all migrants are considered as 'foreigners' (Shore and Black, 1994; Smith and Brinker-Gabler, 1997). Additionally, this European identity takes into account the present societal make-up of Europe as a multicultural continent (this is discussed further below).

In addition, young people perceived Europeanness in terms that are more practical such as the ability to travel freely without constraints within Europe and associated it with the Euro.

Culture discourses

The term 'identity' is difficult to define singularly and cannot be easily discussed without reference to culture. Culture is a fluid construction, encapsulating norms, beliefs, institutions and traditional ways of doing things in a society. Discourses of 'culture' have been used in different ways in pupils' speeches. For example, they used culture as a way to distinguish Europeans from Americans and Muslims who they saw as 'the other'.

Young people in this sample constructed Europeans as being associated with a high culture in contrast with Americans who they saw as having no culture (more differences between Europeans and Americans are discussed later). This high culture – typical of Europeans – is expressed in them being educated in culture such as arts and literature as well as being 'culture rich' of other nationalities in the sense of having experience and knowledge of other cultures.

> I think the stereotypical European is someone who is more knowledgeable about culture and the fine arts. … Europeans are more able to express themselves than someone like Americans because we are more educated in different things such as arts, performing arts or literature. (Max, British, London school)

Classed notions of Europe vs. America are quite evident in the extract above. It can be argued that Europeans were constructed around a middle-class image as they were seen as being more 'knowledgeable' and 'educated' about arts and literature therefore more culturally competent (Bourdieu, 1986 in Skeggs, 2004). Interestingly as well, is that literature and arts are elements that constitute collective belonging (Garcia, 1993). Europe has been portrayed as an older culture 'where society has been developed' (Jessica, British, London school) compared to America, which was represented as a new and younger culture. It can be argued that essential to this discourse on European identity is not only the conception of culture but there is also an assumption of cultural superiority.

Europeanness was also associated with mobility. That is, young people saw Europeans as mobile subjects, who travel to different countries and/or have lived in different countries throughout their lives. It can be said this mobility makes them 'culture-rich' as mentioned above. It might be argued that the amount of contact individuals spend with people from different cultures is a factor that influences the construction of a European identity. The European Commission sees mobility as the main asset of European integration (CEC, 2001) as it promotes 'the feeling of belonging to Europe and the emergence of European citizenship' (EC, 2002, p 30). As the European Commission offers more opportunities for young people to travel through educational programmes such as Socrates and Erasmus, this makes young people more receptive to a European identity. However, the politics of mobility promoted by the European Commission seemed to be based on what Doreen Massey calls 'power-geometry' (in Skeggs, 2004) in the sense that those educational programmes are more readily available to pupils who can afford travelling. As Skeggs (ibid.) argues, voluntary mobility is a resource not available to everyone and it seems to reinforce and reproduce power. This raises the issue of class in the formation of a European identity. Unfortunately, I argue that this identity will mainly be available to an elite and can have, as an unattended consequence, the creation of an elite identity.

Self-Other Discourses

Social relations are organised and divided into oppositional groups – us/them, self/other – embedded in relations of subordination and domination. Group identity is formed as 'the first person plural' as well as 'the third person' (Billig, 1995, p 78). This creates boundaries between 'us' and 'them' and ultimately can lead to stereotypes. The construction of European identity is a process of selection of who is included ('me', 'us') and who is excluded ('the other', 'them'). These themes were manifested in the students' talk. They set up boundaries around the concept of Europeanness, which was constructed against two main counter identities: Americans and Muslims.

The young people in this sample described Europeans in opposition to Americans who they positioned as 'the other'. The following extract from a group interview summarises how these young pupils portrayed Americans.

> Jessica: Americans have got a fatter nation…
>
> Max: [Europeans] are more able to express themselves than someone like Americans because we are more educated in different things such as arts, performing arts or literature.
>
> Jessica: Impose their culture more, don't they?
>
> Emel: They kind of have this kind of Americanism that they just all developed…
>
> Sadie: I think they're more secluded.
>
> Emel: Yeah. America, they're like the centre of the world.
>
> Sadie: Overall, they're not really very caring of other countries.

> Jessica: That might also be because America it's a younger culture…Whereas Europe has been…where society has been developed, mainly, at least to start off with…
>
> Emel: I think with America, Europe is…Europeans and Europe is like…a big group of different people all getting along… (Group interview, London school)

Young people saw Americans as having no culture, as not being cultured or educated, unauthentic, as being isolated from the rest of the world including the American continent, as fat and patriotic. Since a common feature of difference is its dualism and binary oppositions with rigorously opposed identities usually embedded in relations of subordination and domination one can argue Europeans were seen as being cultured, educated, authentic, united, healthy and non-patriotic. In this case, Europeans were clearly portrayed in a very positive light whereas all the characteristics attributed to Americans are negative or less positive.

Many argue that European identity is formed in relationship with Islam (Schlesinger, 1994, Petersson and Hellström, 2003, Mastnak, 1994, Woodward, 1999 and Newmann, 1999). 'The East' and Muslims are Europe's 'other' which as Newmann argues have become a ´generalised social marker in European identity formation´ (1999, p 207) that can ultimately lead to a 'fortress Europe'. In British discourse, for example, Muslims are seen as the 'ultimate other' (Archer, 2003). These themes were present in young people's talk:

> Muslim culture it's different. …Of course you can be European and Muslim but you have to know, two rather different cultures…The way of living, also in the way of treating women it's not really the kind of Catholicism. (Alberto, Italian, European School, Brussels)

Pupils in this study used gender and the lack of human rights as reasons to create Muslims as 'the other'. They produced Europeanness as 'liberal' and 'respectful' through the othering of Muslims as 'unfair'. Rejections of 'the other' on the grounds of different values and attitudes such as human rights which are seen as important features of being European (EC, 2002), can lead to a 'us and them' mentality in regards to the shaping of European identity. It can be argued then, that European identity is produced by the maintenance of the boundaries that separate 'Europeans' from other groups (e.g. Turkey and Muslims) who are constituted as 'other' by their lack of human rights values. The formation of an 'in-group' ('us') and 'out-group' ('them') creates boundaries that are part of identity formation and that are not 'value-free' or neutral. Boundary formation is all about power, and discourses are not 'just' descriptive, they have meaning and they perform actions.

Ideological discourses

The construction of a European identity can be seen as the EUs ideological project (Hakanson, 2001) which consists in 'building up social cohesion by preventing discrimination, exclusion, racism and xenophobia and hence in promoting the fundamental values shared by European societies, such as tolerance and the respect for

human rights' (EC, 2002, p 9). I have found these themes in pupils' talk and they are explored below.

Diversity is often portrayed as one of Europe's particular strengths and characteristics (Garcia, 1993). However, I argue that Europe's diversity can present a challenge to the formation of a European identity. It seems that European identity is becoming increasingly identified with the ability to tolerate significant cultural diversity (Reif, 1993 and Wintle, 1996). These themes were found in pupils' talk.

> I think it's every person…that really feels a European life... That shares this European mentality of saying: yes, Europe… it's a territory of many nations, of many cultures…An European is someone who respects the other and that can be anyone…We could say European is the person who wants to feel European. … It can be someone that has fell in love with Europe. … That has a European feeling, that is, a multicultural feeling, more relational. (Jordi, Spanish, European School, Brussels)

This extract illustrates some of the characteristics students considered important for being European. These young people saw Europeanness as a feeling and one is European if s/he has that feeling which they described as being a 'multicultural' and 'relational' feeling. Both terms are closely connected and reflect what Europe is today, a multicultural, diverse continent where relations between people are an extremely important issue to many governments and indeed, the European Union, Although one can argue this is not unique to European societies. Pupils also associated European identity with a 'mentality', which is one of acceptance of and respect for Europe's diversity and variation as it is characterised as having 'many nations, many cultures'. This 'mentality' of respect and acceptance is based on the notion of multiculturalism, or as Modood (2005) calls it 'pluralist integration', where the pleasant coexistence of differing cultural groups living in a pluralistic society is at its core. The European Union is precisely trying to foster these sort of attitudes: respect and acceptance. In the extract above, the notion of choice was also present; a European is 'the person who wants to feel European'. This implies that pupils' agency is important in the construction of their own identities, namely a European identity. It can be argued that pupils must be willing to accept such identity and this will is a general driving force for group formation. This suggests that there is also a bottom-up process contributing to the development of a European identity which must be taken into account by political elites in their attempts to foster such identity.

Young people also regarded European identity as something more complex than a mere ideology. They saw it as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). As Anderson argues it is imagined because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (1983, p 6). European identity as an 'imagined community' was present in the following extract:

> I haven't been to Italy and never experienced their culture but I would still say I'm European. (Lorna, British, London school)

From the above extract, it is evident that Lorna did not think she needed first-hand experience of another European culture (in this case Italy) to feel European. This was because the simple fact of being aware, of imagining the presence of other European societies creates a link between her and other European 'fellow-members' and therefore, gives her a sense of a collective identity. European identity then is subjective and a lived experience. Another student used the theme of 'community' in his talk when asked about what Europe meant to him.

> It's community… It makes geographical sense, as Europe is a formation of countries that are all together and if we're all together by land then we should be in spirit and attitude. (Max, British, London school)

Europe was also 'imagined' as limited, as having finite boundaries. This was evident in the extract below.

> Geographically, Europe is limited to certain countries. So we have Eastern Europe, Western Europe. …There are frontiers. Europe…is limited; there's Asia and the beginning of Europe. …Turkey is not in Europe. …If Europe enlarges itself outside its frontiers, then there's little interest in calling it Europe. (Pepito, Belgian, European School, Brussels)

This extract demonstrates the 'limits' of an all-inclusive discourse. It seems there is a need to draw boundaries to be able to define Europe. It can be argued that Europe needs boundaries, frontiers to be 'meaningful'. However, the creation of these boundaries implies the exclusion of what is not included within them, which in turn can increase xenophobia, racism, discrimination and intolerance, which is precisely what the European Union is trying to combat. It can be argued that this is a paradox of a European identity creation.

Resistances and challenges for the construction of a European identity

Some students resisted the idea of a European identity because they saw it as a divide between people and some even questioned its usefulness. As one student put it:

> It's just this divide between people like, what country you're from or the continent you live on. It's just a divide and it's like, why do you need that. … It's constantly narrowing people down to just one type of thing. (Lorna, British, London school)

This type of resistance – and indeed any resistance – in my view, can prove to be counter-productive to the creation of a European identity. Another challenge the European Union faces in creating a European identity is the cultural diversity characteristic of Europe. As some have argued tolerance and acceptance of diversity has its limits (Hakanson, 2001). The French riots at the end of 2005 are an illustration of this challenge. Those riots raised questions about the role of race, ethnicity and religion and the exclusion of first- and second-generation migrants.

As one student mentioned when describing a European, 'It has also to accept and know other European nationalities' (Alberto, Italian, European School, Brussels). This implies that the level of acceptance and tolerance can be exceeded when confronted with non-European cultures that might be seen as a threat. Tolerance should however, include non-Europeans as well.

Another challenge the European Union faces is the rise of right-wing parties across Europe. They represent a threat to the European dream and ideology of unity as they take advantage of situations like the French riots in 2005 to (re)create an exclusive version of a European identity, one that excludes migrants and non-white people.

Some limitations for the construction of a European identity

My findings indicate two limitations for the construction and preservation of a European identity. First, the abstractness of the concept 'European' resulted in some students being sceptical towards the development of a European identity.

> I don't think we can feel European. … It's strange as a concept, I think. … It's not concrete. (Sevastos, French, European School, Brussels)

The second limitation has to do with the fact that some students that felt European admitted they stop feeling European once they were either at home, in their home country or away from the European School. My analysis is that this proves the contextual and contingent character typical of identities. However, it also raises questions about the durability of a European identity. It is necessarily a provisional and contextual project.

Conclusion

Young people constructed European identity in practical/rational terms. They associated it with the ability to travel freely within the EU, with the Euro, according to geographical criterion and associated with EU membership. European identity was based on an idea of superiority to others, as being culturally superior to Americans and Muslims where both were seen as the two main counter-identities. Pupils saw Europeans as cultured, educated, culture rich, authentic, united, healthy, non-patriotic, tolerant and respectful of human rights. The definitions and perceptions of Europeanness were partly based on the present and future of the EU as some students included migrants in their conception of Europeanness as these represent the current and future inhabitants within the EU. Students in this study conceived Europeanness as a 'mentality', a commonly held value based on the acceptance and respect for diversity.

Europeanness was also seen as a choice and some students resisted the idea of European identity. This demonstrates that the efforts made by both the EU and any policy maker to foster a European identity will be impossible without young people's will. It can also be concluded that for the process of European identity construction to be successful, policy makers have to embrace individual differences – as some students think in a certain way – and context in their policy development. Another important point that policy makers need to be aware is that the creation of frontiers can lead to discrimination and can be

exclusionary. Therefore, they need to be extra careful when setting up boundaries in their attempts to define Europeanness or Europe. Another concluding remark based on these preliminary findings is that a European identity might be one identity among many others. I would like to conclude this paper with the following extract, which I think is a genuine illustration of the present situation in Europe:

> We have a lot of work to…reach that European dream. We have a lot of work because it doesn't exist – at the moment it doesn't exist – a true feeling of…true union, yes. (Jordi, Spanish, European School, Brussels)

Notes

1. Two national schools in the UK, Belgium and Luxembourg.
2. One European School in the UK, Belgium and Luxembourg.
3. The sample consisted of five girls and four boys. Five White British, two Black African, one Other Black and one Other Black, Other Mixed and any Other.
4. The sample consisted of five girls and five boys. Eight White and two Mixed.
5. Focus groups could not be performed due to organisational reasons in the school.
6. Interviews of approximately 45 minutes were recorded and transcribed. All real names have been changed to maintain anonymity and informed consent was gained from all minor students.

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