

UNREACHABLE SELF-EXPECTATIONS: WHAT IS GOING ON IN OUR SOCIETY REGARDING YOUNG ADOLESCENTS?

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ABSTRACT. The article “Email as an arena for self-construction among gifted young adolescents: A qualitative study” (Dillon, 2012) is an invitation to reflect upon the meanings and types of values behind the perception of what it is to be successful, what it means to be worthy in a society. Even though the article’s main purpose is to “gain insights through examining the emergence of a diverse array of ‘self’ voices”, it goes beyond by bringing to reader closer to a reflection upon what do youngsters think they are expected to do. It is possible to observe in the participants’ narratives what motivations drive them to their quotidian activities, especially those regarding school. Their perception of success and failure is deeply embedded and intertwined in the understanding present in their cultural context of what it is to be good and successful. Not only is the acceleration of accomplishments present as a demand for success, but also the absence of mistakes. Maybe this is an excessively heavy burden to carry, the burden to always be perfect, flawless, exemplary, even though it seems to be what youngsters hold in the contemporary days.

Dillon’s article consists of an important contribution not only to the methodological aspect of qualitative and microgenetic research, but also to understanding gifted young adolescents and the social construction of their subjectivity.

As Dillon mentioned, the “aim of the study was to gain insights through examining the diverse array of self voices”, and also to respond questions like “what key voices emerge in the participants’ email journals? What kinds of selves did they construct?” After reading the article, not only these questions were present in my mind, but also others were triggered: what is it in the cultural context and in others’ voices that is able to influence a specific way of self-perception in these gifted young adolescents?

Dillon states that, according to Harter (1999), typically young adolescents are caught in several demands to please adults and their own necessity for praise and popularity from peers. Moreover, Dillon points out that the way giftedness is constructed may affect one’s ideas about what it means to be successful or to fail and

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how one might expect gifted young adolescents to aspire and behave. These are crucial aspects when understating data discussion.

I have to praise the fact that the analysis was based on the participants' voices and not on predetermined categories. Since categories tend to break data information, they also tend to turn it into a phenomenon which was broken into pieces. Considering that voices are intertwined and cross all possible categories, by analyzing data according to the participants' emerging voices, the researcher is able to reach the phenomenon in its complexity.

On this subject, Valsiner (2007) states that a population is a collection of species in a given category, situated in a given universe. According to him, and I agree with it, it would be more appropriate to define a population in terms of a joint complex, in which each member of the population belongs to the universe in his/her peculiar way, given the biological, sociological, psychological and anthropological variation. Instead, the concept of population usually used in research eliminates systemic qualities of the whole, so that populations are depleted in their structure. Like any group stripped of their relationship to the whole, the subjects are taken as belonging to a population when the systemic relationship between the members is eliminated and not emphasized. Sato et al (2007) exemplify that in the mainstream research process all the leaves of a tree form a "population" only when they are considered separately from their space in the tree. That is, a complete tree is a tree, a system combining all leaves, not a population of leaves of a tree. The same authors give another example: an army, with all the soldiers from various patents and roles becomes a "population" when its members finish buried in a separate cemetery. Thus, these authors argue that the concept of the general population does not reach the whole, inasmuch as it does not capture the phenomenon as a whole if the relationships between the members and the whole is not taken into account. Therefore, when analyzing data according to the participants' voices and not according to separated breaking categories, Dillon was able to grasp the system it in its entirety, she was able to perceive the tree and the leaves as a whole, the army with its soldiers in action. The metaphors work as an exercise to perceive the phenomenon as it happens, in its process and not as a snapshot of fragmented former parts of a whole.

Considering the type of analysis conducted by Dillon, I noticed, and the author reassures it in the discussion section, that most of the participants are very self-demanding. I observed it in Piggy-in-the-Middle's narrative. In the Excerpt 5:

(...) I had just come from my 200m final – which I completely blew – I ran a slow time and wasn't focused.

When one reads this one might think she was probably one of the last in the final score, however, little after I was surprised by the statement on the same excerpt 5:

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I still came second though. (...) Dad and I decided not to do anymore school sport, so I can focus on my schoolwork.

On Excerpt 6, Piggy-in-the-middle narrates all her A grades, evincing how excellent she is as a student. Considering she is very happy with these results (A first place, and not second), and since she was very disappointed with the results in her sports competition (second place), it seems that her expectations on herself are extremely high. Being so, I wondered why she decided not to focus on sports anymore, since it is something she really enjoys as she herself mentioned, and focus on the schoolwork. Is it not possible for her to deal with being in second place?

There is more to it: even though the participant Channel did not mention on the excerpt showed in the article specifically any type of self-demanding aspect of his, on excerpt 8, the following statement appears:

(...) Mum only signed me up (in an advanced class), so I could accelerate and do the HSC early.

It seems to be another aspect of high expectations toward this young adolescent, since the only reason his mother signed him up on the advanced course was for him to **accelerate**. Even though acceleration has been one of the major complaints about our times, it seems to be part of our constructed meanings regarding successful outcomes. So a mother wants her daughter to be successful and therefore wants her to accelerate. There is an aspect of demand to success associated to rapidness.

Midas Well made it even clearer and straightforward, as his own words depicted his feeling towards himself on Excerpt 11:

(...)But one thing that I would rather be able to do other than get first, is to walk off and be happy with what I played. (I can say I've never done that) Maybe this is what drives me to do better....but it would be nice every now and then to be happy with what I've done.(...) . I feel I really didn't deserve to win. (...)I only do things like eisteddfods, exams, comps etc for myself, to continually prove myself to me. I've found out that ultimately...I'm the hardest person to please myself. Being self critical applies to everything, sport, school etc, and many people find it annoying, but it is what makes me strive harder.....and that will never change. I do it for me and no other reason....

In this case, it is not about not being satisfied with a good score, it is about not being satisfied with having the best score. It seems to be a chain of improving self-demand. Dillon points out that the focus on marks as assessment as a measure of achievement “appeared restrictive to the participants of mainstream school contexts”, and that “there was evidence of a routine pursuit for top marks amongst all school students”. What does it tell us? There is something crossing all gifted young adolescents (and maybe all others) in this cultural environment, here represented by the school environment. Is excessive self-demand and perfectionism something represented by a

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voice constantly present in their subjective worlds? Why it does appear as vividly among homeschool gifted youngsters?

Something is going on in the school environment, something is going on in the meanings constructed in a society regarding being successful and its association with intense self-demand. It would be interesting to understand, and this study triggers it, which internal and external voices are influencing this necessity for perfection and this never ending feeling of incompleteness. What psychological mechanism is triggering this need for perfection? What is common in the participants regarding this mechanism?

If the homeschool participants did not mention assessment or scores, suggesting their freedom to participate with a more flexible approach in their daily lives, what does this tell us about the school environment? Furthermore, what does this tell us about how society expects youngsters to be? I think Dillon's article is really important for us to understand and reflect upon what society expects from youngsters, how they deal with it and how their subjective worlds are influenced by such an expectation.

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