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ILLITERACY: CAN DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY EXPLAIN AND HELP?

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> *"To form a ready-made image of your fellow-man or anyone else is to say 'Thus and so are you and that's all there is to it'. It is a sign of non-love, a sin .... If you love someone then you let all options open for him and in spite of all the memories of the past you are just willing to be surprised, again and again..."*
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> Max Frisch: *Stiller* (1954/1981)

ABSTRACT. Coombs uses Dialogical Self Theory and processes of identity formation to clarify the origination and resolution of reading problems. But other factors may have played a key role: flaws in technical reading lessons and neurobiological maturation. Coombs illustrates the long-lasting impact of labels, that people attach to themselves and to others. A question arises: how can we foster self-knowledge in young people without running the risks of labeling?

KEYWORDS: Dialogical Self, reading problems, labeling

Once upon a time, when I was about ten years old, I found myself in a swimming pool, staring at the water. I was all alone and wanted to dive, but lacked the courage. I realized that there was no physical danger. If I only could convince myself that I dared, I would dive. But all the time I could not say this to myself and believe it, I hesitated. Finally I dived. Perhaps at that moment my lifelong interest in self-concept and self-talk was born. It had become clear to me that what you think of yourself can determine what you do.

Dawan Coombs' article is about the impact of self-narratives on a far more important subject: illiteracy among adolescents, which is a huge problem. According to Coombs' American sources, between one third and one half of US high school students struggle with basic reading skills and only one third of ninth graders will graduate with the skills necessary to enter the work force or go on to postsecondary education. Also in

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Europe the problem is serious. Bunke et al. (2012) state: “One in five 15-year-olds in Europe, as well as many adults, lack basic reading and writing skills." The negative consequences are becoming more and more serious as low level jobs disappear and the digital world seems to replace more and more the physical world. "Reading and writing are essential skills, not least as they are the key to further learning.” (Bunke et al, 2012, p. 5).

Coombs opens her explorative study stating "some researchers theorize students don’t fail in school, but that schools fail students by denying them opportunities to practice literacy in personally meaningful ways" (p. 11). She conducted a multiple case study about the narrative identities of struggling adolescent readers. In her article she tells the story of Sarah in detail. In the beginning of her precarious school career a faulty ADHD diagnose was made, followed by treatment with Ritalin. During her childhood and adolescence her development as a reader was problematic. Coombs argues that her identity played an important role in this. Sarah thought of herself as dumb and as a reader on third grade level. But later, as an adolescent she discovered a book that she read with passion. In talking about it with others, she became part of a reading community. She began to consider herself a reader. Reading opened up the world for her and gave her confidence to take steps towards her goal of becoming an occupational therapist.

Coombs interweaves the story of Sarah with a theoretical account of Dialogical Self Theory and hermeneutics, in particular Ricoeur's mimetic process, that resembles in several respects the Self Confrontation Method (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). Her effort to integrate story and theory is not successful in all respects, but makes the article interesting. Is it convincing in its main message? Perhaps it would have been more so if the author had paid more attention to defining the key concepts of identity and self. Or if she had explained her research method better. It's not very clear for example what the exact purpose of her research was. And why Sarah was chosen from the seven students that were interviewed and observed? Is this girl a representative case for struggling readers? In view of my experience as a beginning diver, I can easily follow and acknowledge Coombs line of thinking. But still I don't find it very convincing, mainly because very different perspectives on the matter seem at least as valid. I think for instance from the point of view of Katzir & Paré-Blagoev (2006) who emphasize the neurobiological origins of reading difficulties. They point at a growing consensus that these difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language processing. They refer to several pre–post intervention studies that result in enhanced reading accompanied by differences in brain activity. Furthermore Katzir & Paré-Blagoev convincingly substantiate that literacy demands that several brain systems have to mature and be able to be coordinated. This maturation process happens in quite divergent ways, depending on individual, largely genetic

factors (Craik & Bialystok, 2006). The fact that Sarah got an ADHD diagnose indicates that she had early attention problems. That at a certain point she finally read and enjoyed a book, can perhaps be explained as the result of maturation of coordinating brain systems, e.g. the prefrontal cortex, where the integration of feeling and cognition resides and the short term memory that is a prerequisite to interpreting a story as a whole (Crone, 2009; Goldberg, 2009). Another aspect of maturation is that adolescence is marked by a strong desire to connect to peers (Kegan, 1994). This can be a potent motivator to read, as in the case of Sarah. Unfortunately it can also be a strong motivator not to read, as in the case of 17% of 21,000 youngsters in a survey, admitting they would be 'embarrassed if my friends saw me read' (Clark, 2012).

It is difficult to imagine how the kind of research that was conducted by Coombs could clarify the relative importance of identity and technical/maturational matters in the etiology of literacy problems. The story of Sarah is gripping and it's easy to sympathize with her vicissitudes. But it struck me that the most important things that happened in connection to the changes in Sarah's identity resulted from inner rather than outer dialogues. Take for example the first incident that is reported in connection with Sarah feeling dumb. It was when a computer-based reading program indicated that she had a low reading level. On this basis she was not allowed to select library books of the same level as her classmates. "I felt really dumb .... So I'd make sure all my classmates were picking out books before I would go pick out my book so they wouldn't see me picking out a book." But Sarah didn't recollect any of her classmates calling her names or teasing her. The second important incident two years later resembles this first incident. In this case Sarah notices that she is not chosen as often as her classmates for reading aloud. Also this time nobody calls her dumb, but she puts herself in the dumb category. As Coombs explains Sarah is influenced by the opinions of her peers, whether real or imagined. Lastly there is the dramatic change in Sarah's desire and confidence to read that stems from her experience with a book that she picked and that she felt quickly engaged with. She flew through it. It was the first book that she ever read all by herself.

It can be concluded that the changes Sarah went through can be explained in several ways. One of them is by Dialogical Self Theory and the nascency and transformation of a debilitating identity. But other explanations are that there must have been flaws in technical reading lessons in the beginning of her school career or in her maturation processes, influencing motivation and her capacity to read. Undoubtedly these alternate explanations shed light on the problem from different angles. Coombs' interpretation leads to some appealing, important implications for practices in education:

- be careful with self-directed procedures of turn-taking, where smart kids pick smart kids for the next turn or less smart kids loose the turn very quickly

- encourage collaboration rather than competition
- give pupils and students opportunities to choose texts themselves
- be careful with labels; they have a lasting power

This last recommendation is closest to the heart of Coombs' article. She refers to Dweck to illustrate her point: "When individuals are associated with negative labels and stereotypes, they expend great amounts of mental energy worrying about whether or not their actions or performance confirms those stereotypes, energy that could be directed towards learning and performance. "Indeed, Dweck and Grant (2008) argue in a convincing review, that 'entity-self theories' have several detrimental effects. Even in the case of positive labels, like 'you are intelligent'. Among the negative effects they mention and explain are: motivation to perform instead of learn; use of self-handicapping strategies; tendency to respond in a defensive way to setbacks; loss of self-esteem, intrinsic motivation and perseverance; lower performance. Csank & Conway (2004) refer to literature indicating that having very clear self-concepts in terms of traits is associated with perfectionism, defensive reactions to negative experience and augmented risk of depression. Brophy (2009) concludes a special issue of The Educational Psychologist on identity and motivation stating that "... identities are double-edged swords. In their early stages of development, they provide important sources of motivation for curiosity and exploration. However, as they become more clearly delineated, and especially if they become rigidly solidified, they begin to guide us more strongly toward certain experiences but away from others... identities can limit or even foreclose potential exposures to other experiences. People with multiple and permeable identities are better off than people with limited and rigid identities" (p. 155).

As professionals interested in Dialogical Self Theory we might underestimate the frequency of 'formistic' ways of thinking about the self, i.e. looking at ourselves (and other people) in terms of traits and types (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). Take for example the investigation of Leontiev and Salikhova (2010). On logical grounds they discern four types of self-descriptions. One of them they call 'simple introspective, self-focused self-description'. Its content is static images of oneself as something given and nonmalleable consisting e.g. of habits, traits and strivings. This type of self-description is by far the most common. Among their 114 respondents the static self-images showed up more often than all three other types taken together. Even in a group of 33 psychologists this type of thinking prevails. A dialogical way of self-description was rare, although it was less rare among psychologists than among the other groups. It was most rare among the junior group that consisted of 58 students (age 15 to 20).

This last finding should not come as a surprise. It's well known that adolescents in many cases tend to think in black and white categories (depending on the norms and values of parents or peers) and have difficulties integrating feelings and cognitions and

overviewing complexity (Kegan, 1994). Their prefrontal cortex - the part of the brain that coordinates the whole of the brain - matures only around the age of 25 (Crone, 2009; Goldberg, 2009). No wonder that adolescents tend to think about themselves in 'formistic' terms. A problem in teaching and coaching is that most of their teachers and coaches think, as Leontiev and Salikhova indicate, in the same terms. In education, teachers very often give information to students as facts in absolute language without explaining that the information is context dependent. "Forming premature cognitive commitments is almost a prerequisite for doing well in school, even through college" (Langer, 1993: 45). How can a dialogical form of self-knowledge then emerge? Stimulating self-reflection in these circumstances might reinforce 'formistic', 'entity-self' forms of self-knowledge. An additional problem is that these kinds of self-concepts are extremely resistant to change, even in the face of facts that contradict them (Greenwald, 1980; Bergner & Holmes, 2000). How can negative consequences like those described by Dweck & Grant, Csank & Conway and Brophy then be avoided? Here lie some challenges for Dialogical Self Theory and practice.

At the end of Coombs article the danger of labeling is illustrated by Sarah herself. Undoubtedly with the best of intentions she says about the clients that she is going to help in her future as occupational therapist: "I know what they've gone through and I know I can help them through their struggles like I have." She does not seem to realize that the struggles of her clients will in many cases be very different from her own. Will she be able to be surprised, again and again?

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