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## Adolescent identity formation in the context of vocationally oriented special needs schools

 Carmelita Jacobs and  Lynette Collair

Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, South Africa  
carmelitaj32@sun.ac.za

Adolescence is a phase that is associated with important identity-relevant issues. Shaping a clear sense of identity is an important step in developing a healthy psychosocial disposition, and the school is an important context where this can happen. In this article, we explore how adolescents who had attended a special needs school of skills in the Western Cape, South Africa, perceived the role that their school experiences played in shaping their sense of identity. These were learners who entered the school of skills with a poor sense of self, due to years of academic difficulties and exclusion in mainstream primary schools. Using a qualitative research design, data was collected through interviews, and analysed by means of the inductive process of thematic content analysis. The findings showed that participants' school experiences shaped their sense of identity in a more positive way. The participants' narratives speak to the complexity in the individual, the school and the community in contributing to a sense of identity with both positive and negative aspects. Though the participants experienced a sense of belonging and felt accepted by their teachers and peers, the school did not deliver on its implicit promise of a job-related skill, and this in turn negatively affected their thinking about future life paths and careers, which is important for identity formation.

**Keywords:** adolescence; identity formation; schools of skills; teacher-student relationships; vocational identity; vocationally oriented schools

### Introduction

Knowing who one is and developing a clear sense of identity are crucial aspects of healthy psychosocial development, and they can have an impact on many different facets of one's life. Adolescents in particular face considerable pressure to form a sense of who they are and to decide on what they are going to do with their lives (Côté & Levine, 2002; Kroger, 2007; Stoop, 2005). One of the main reasons for this is that by the end of this developmental stage, they are required to transition successfully from school to the world of work, where they are expected to become active members of society and make an economic contribution (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca & Ritchie, 2012). Therefore, a key development task for adolescents in this life stage is to establish a secure identity to help them navigate through a stage fraught with concerns about establishing a value system, gaining independence, developing social responsibility and creating a career path (Louw, A, Louw & Ferns, 2007; Louw, D & Kail, 2007).

Identity formation is characterised as a process in which individuals make sense of their identity based on a combination of their individual characteristics, as well as the feedback they receive in their interactions with significant others in their social environment (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). There appears to be agreement that forming a sense of identity is fundamentally about making meaning of who you are, where you have come from, and where you are going in life (Cox & McAdams, 2010; La Guardia, 2009; Louw, A et al., 2007). Therefore, even though identity formation is an individual process of meaning making, social experiences play an important role in providing feedback, offering support, and in a sense, assisting in the shaping of a sense of identity (Sestito & Sica, 2014). Schools play a crucial role in providing these social experiences for adolescents. Schools have thus been described as social agents in the process of identity formation, due to the spaces they create for interaction among peers, learners and teachers. According to Eccles and Roeser (2011:580) "young people shape their own school experiences based on their subjective perceptions of the socialization [*sic*] context and socializing [*sic*] agents in schools." Similarly, Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma (2006) concluded that school experiences have a mediating role in student's identity formation within the school context. The authors found that for their participants' school experiences acted as a personal resource, which they used in the process of their identity formation.

Despite these findings, Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma (2006:87) remark that "the study of identity formation in the school context is still a wasteland." Criticism has also been raised that many empirical studies in the area of identity formation in school context focuses on the individual components of identity formation, and not on the "space between individual and social context", where identity formation often takes place (Flum & Kaplan, 2012:244). It appears that even though Erikson's view of identity formation emphasised individual as well as social factors, the social components, such as school experiences, continue to be neglected in research (Flum & Kaplan, 2012; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). We contend that the context and sociocultural processes within the context are significant roleplayers in identity formation.

Our conceptualisation of school experiences is adapted from the definition that Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma (2006) provide, and include the school's image and the feedback the learners receive about the school; the ways that the learners learn to cope with school expectations or difficulties that they experience; and the

social interaction with peers within the school, especially since learners spend “an important part of their time” with peers (Lannegrund-Willems & Bosma, 2006:91). In addition, the focus of this study is the school experiences within a vocationally-orientated school of skills. Therefore, in addition to the above-mentioned factors, we also considered the opportunities for developing a future orientation presented by the unique curriculum offered at the school of skills.

Since schools differ across a range of variables, such as mainstream or special needs schools, state or private schools, co-ed or single sex schools, and privileged or disadvantaged schools, it is expected that different schools present a variety of experiences to their learners. This notion is supported by research that has emphasised that schools with a lower socioeconomic status are often connected to negative school experiences, while schools with a more favourable socio-economic status leads to active engagement in the process of identity formation (Lannegrund-Willems & Bosma, 2006). In the South African context, much of the research has focused on identity formation in a post-apartheid school context (Dawson, 2007; Stoop, 2005). For example, in her research with high school learners, Dawson (2007) found that her participant’s sense of identity was focused on aspects of difference, especially ‘race.’

In the context of vocationally-orientated education, researchers have focused on domain specific areas of identity such as gender identity formation in a “public-vocational-school auto shop” (Marusza, 1997:175), and women’s scientific identity formation in a vocational school context (Brickhouse & Potter, 2001). Therefore, a gap that we identified was that no understanding exists on how adolescents who attended a school of skill had made sense of their school experiences, and the role these experiences had in shaping their sense of identity.

### The Context

The context is a school of skills in the Western Cape. In South Africa, schools serving learners with special education needs (LSEN) are referred to as LSEN schools. LSEN schools include schools for learners with physical disabilities, neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism, schools for the deaf or visually impaired, and schools of skills. Schools of skills are schools where learners between the ages of 14 and 18 are placed who experience barriers to learning because of cognitive, behavioural or specific learning difficulties, and who do not progress at the same rate as their peers, but who do not have a specific sensory, neurodevelopmental or physical disability, in order to receive support in the form of an adapted curriculum. The curriculum is adapted by including a 50% vocationally-oriented, skills com-

ponent (e.g. welding, catering, painting or hairdressing), and a 50% academic component. These schools are referred to as ‘schools of skills’ in the Western Cape in South Africa, and in short, can be described as delivering education that orientates a learner within a specific occupation that would hopefully provide him or her with an orientation towards a particular trade. This would then enable the learners to do further training in the trade or enable them to take up a basic lower skilled position in the chosen trade (The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2012).

It is envisaged that in the future, vocational training for all learners, including those within LSEN, would take place in mainstream vocational and technical high schools (South African National Association for Specialised Education (SANASE), 2010). It has been reported that a General Education and Training Certificate: Skills and Vocational Training is being developed for learners who enter the vocational track (Motshekga, 2015). Learners who are successful and who want to further their education may then enrol for a bridging course at a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college.

Internationally, it appears that learners who experience academic difficulties and who may benefit from a vocational track are placed in special streams in career and technical education high schools in the USA, and similarly in vocational high schools in Germany (The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2012). Vocational education and training is criticised internationally in countries such as South Korea and Australia and nationally in South Africa as being ‘inferior education’ (Ryan, 2003). In South Africa, it has negative associations with the social design of apartheid ideology, which designated people according to racial classification to types of employment, with some being schooled in vocational schools with limited academic content in the curriculum to limit the type and level of employment for which they would be eligible (The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2012). However, countries such as Germany, Switzerland and the USA have learnt to manage this challenge, and vocational training and education is construed positively, and carries the same status as other streams of education (The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2012).

The status of vocational education and training therefore needs to be revisited, especially since the school context is identified as a “central domain in the life of the adolescent’s life experiences and sense of who they are and who they want to become” (Kaplan & Flum, 2012:172). It is promising that the rationale behind the development of schools of skills is to provide opportunities to learners at risk of failing and dropping out of school to orientate themselves towards a skill that would assist them as they navigate their way into

the adult world. However, little is known about the role that this particular context plays in the process of identity formation. The goal, therefore, was to investigate how the participants perceived their school experiences, and how they felt these experiences shaped their sense of identity.

The article continues with a brief presentation of the study's theoretical framework, which is rooted in Erikson's (1968) work on identity formation and Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma's (2006) conceptualisation of school experience. The methodological approach is then elaborated on, followed by a discussion of the findings and the conclusion.

#### Identity Formation in Adolescence

There are many notions of what identity constitutes; however, most researchers continue to draw on the seminal work of Erik Erikson. Erikson (1968) was the first to propose that identity formation comes to the fore during the adolescent phase of development. The adolescent phase forms part of eight stages of development, namely infancy, early childhood, pre-school, school age, adolescence, young adult, adulthood and maturity (Louw, D & Kail, 2007). Erikson went further to allocate certain psychosocial tasks to each stage necessary as a foundation for the stage to follow (Erikson, 1968:94). For example, babies either learn to trust or mistrust during the infancy phase, and children either achieve a sense of industry or inferiority at the end of the school-age stage. A sense of industry generally refers to a sense of being competent in at least one thing.

Erikson demarcated adolescence specifically as a "crisis" or "turning point", when either a secure identity or a sense of confusion is formed (Erikson, 1968:96). During this phase, adolescents are said to explore alternatives, and then finally make certain commitments to life choices such as a career direction or life partner. However, even though adolescence was demarcated as the key stage for identity formation, it has also been argued that identity formation can be tracked through all the stages (Erikson, 1968:90). For example, one of the first identity-related transactions occurs during infancy when babies recognise and learn to trust their mother or caregiver. Similarly, during the early childhood stage, toddlers develop a sense of courage and willpower as they reach their developmental milestones. In the initiative pre-school phase, children bring a sense of purpose to their identity as they exercise curiosity through asking questions and exploring their environment. In the industry stage, school-age children are said to build a foundation for a sense of duty in life, and they often attach themselves to parents and teachers whom they can watch and imitate (Erikson, 1968:129).

Identity formation is thus presented by Erikson as something that should be achieved. However, the concept of identity formation has evolved to the understanding that it is a process and that it varies between stages of change and stability (Kroger, 2007). Researchers have also established that this process often needs more time, and therefore, some have extended the adolescent period and refer to the emerging adulthood stage (Arnett, 2004). For this reason, some have pointed out that there is a "richness and depth" (Flum & Kaplan, 2012:240) to the concept that encourages researchers to continue investigating its complexity.

At present, the definition of identity formation is still similar to that of Erikson's in that it is understood as an active process of developing an understanding of "who I was, who I am and who I will be" (Cox & McAdams, 2010:20), and forming the best possible sense of identity still requires an active exploration of possibilities and a decision to commit to certain values, goals and activities that will sustain how one sees oneself and who others confirm one to be (La Guardia, 2009). In addition, although all of these elements are likely to contribute to one's identity, Wetherell and Mohanty (2010) contend that it is the meaning and interpretation that one chooses and accepts, as part of who one is, that becomes the true self. One's identity can therefore be described as the story one tells about one's experiences (Cox & McAdams, 2010), or rather, the version of the story that one chooses to tell.

This story is influenced by an interplay of individual and social components, and is therefore understood as an integration of or adaptation between the self and the context (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). One of the most important developmental and sociocultural contexts for adolescents is the school; therefore, within the social context, cultural-institutional settings such as schools should have a supportive role in the process of identity formation (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Especially since schools can provide a framework for learners to actively develop meaningful school experiences that contribute to how they make sense of their identity (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006). For that reason, it is important for all role players within education to understand the experiences that have an impact on the process of identity formation, especially since these aspects have implications for how adolescents engage with post-school challenges and decisions (Flum & Kaplan, 2012).

Empirical studies provide support for the view that school experiences have an impact on identity formation. Aspects that have been highlighted as having a significant influence include the quality of interactions of all the members in the school

(Kaplan & Flum, 2012), the presence of a culture of learning where identity issues are incorporated as part of the curriculum and all school activities (Faircloth, 2012; Sinai, Kaplan & Flum, 2012), and the importance of all relational processes in producing identity formation (Bosma & Kunnen, 2008). In particular, research around school experiences and their influence on identity formation of adolescents has shown that “the school context has an undeniable importance in the student careers and more in general in how they see themselves as students” (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006: 91). Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma (2006) formulated an understanding of school experiences which they based on a sociological definition proposed by two French philosophers, Dubet and Martuccelli (1996, in Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006), whose conceptualisation of school experience included three aspects. The first aspect centred on the feedback that students received about the school and their own school performance, which led to the development of a particular school self-image. Secondly it included the ways that students acquired skills and strategies to cope with the particular challenges they experienced and subsequently the ways in which the students adapted and integrated into the school environment. The last aspect was specifically related to integration with their peers, because in their developmental phase, adolescents often seek independence from their parents and spend more time with peers; therefore peers play a significant role in identity formation (Kroger, 2007).

Consequently, in exploring how the participants perceived the role that their school experiences played in shaping their sense of identity, our aim was to gain insight into their perception, understanding and memories of particular personal observations, encounters and relationships, which had made an impact on how they made meaning of who they are, where they came from, and where they were going in life. These included perceptions, understandings, and memories of the school’s image, strategies and integration with peers. In addition to these aspects, we also looked at their experience with the skills training component which is present within the context of the school of skills. The skills training is related to the development of a future orientation or vocational identity, which is key to being able to answer the final question of successful identity formation, namely ‘where am I going?’ Therefore, how the adolescents perceived and felt about their future prospects was also explored in order to gain a fuller understanding of the meaning that the participants had made from their experiences at the school of skills, and how they felt these experiences had shaped their sense of identity.

## Method

The research was located in the interpretivist paradigm, with the aim of being descriptive and gaining an understanding of the participants’ perceptions of their school experiences, retrospectively. The researchers identified information-rich participants, who were purposively selected on the basis of being adolescents having attended and completed their studies at a school of skills no more than two years prior to the start of the research. The emphasis was on collecting “rich, narrative accounts of the participants’ experiences” (Etherington & Bridges, 2011:12). Adolescents between the ages of 18 and 20 years old were selected because it is expected that during the developmental phase of adolescence, the psychosocial stage of identity development is foremost, and their years at school resulted in substantial experience at a school of skills. They were thus considered to be rich sources of data, that would address our research interest. Past learners of the school of skills were tracked down through word of mouth, and approached to participate in the study. Six adolescents indicated their willingness to participate, however, of the six potential participants, four participants, two males and two females, met the criteria of having completed the programme at a school of skills within two years prior to the research. Julie, Rosie, Nick and Jack (pseudonyms), were between the ages of 18 and 20, they resided in the same community, living approximately 2km apart. The community is home to many socio-economic challenges, and safety concerns. The participants were, further, of the same ethnic group. The four participants were identified by the education department as having a barrier to learning and therefore referred to the school of skills. The participants were able to express themselves verbally. The participants consented to participate in the research and granted permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded, and for the content to be reported on for the purpose of the research.

The aspect of identity formation that we sought to understand was the participants’ meaning-making of their sense of self in relation to their school experiences at the school of skills. Therefore, in line with Stoop’s sentiment that “we need to consider what it is really like from [the adolescent’s] point of view” (2005:63), we conducted semi-structured interviews, which we considered an appropriate means to explore and probe the school experiences of the participants as these related to their identity formation. The interview guide explored the themes: ‘who am I?’, ‘where do I come from?’, and ‘where am I going?’ The participants were also asked to describe their experiences at the school of skills and how they felt

these experiences had shaped their sense of self. We used these themes as a way to access the worlds of the four adolescents and report on their sense making of who they are as individuals.

It was decided to include the contributions from the parents who were also interviewed as they were considered key informants, who were constants in the lives of their children, and who over time bore witness to their children's experiences of school, as well as their identity development. Insights from the participant's teachers might have provided further insight, however, the limited scope of the study delimited it to only including parents as additional informants.

The data that we collected through the interviews was subjected to thematic content analysis, which sought to explore and describe relations and underlying themes in the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The aim was to attach significance to what was found, "making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order" (Patton, 2002:480, cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011:219). Data was further verified through triangulation of sources (adolescents, parents and researcher's notes) and verification of meaning by the participants (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006). In the next section, we discuss the findings.

## Findings and Discussion

### Being Defined by the School's Image

Within the community, the school of skills was assigned a marginal status. Julie, Rosie, Nick and Jack's narratives speak of the marginalisation of special needs schools within the broader formal educational landscape. The perceived negative image was initially internalised by these participants. Their transcripts show that the participants shared a heightened awareness of the community's negative views of the school. According to Julie and Jack, it was not uncommon for members of the community to hold the opinion that the school is an institution created for 'mad children.' Nick's observation was that their school was not valued by the community, as they saw a school of skills as a place for 'stupid, dumb children' (because 'they worked with their hands'). The negative image that others had of their school left the participants feeling inferior and embarrassed to attend the school. This feeling of inferiority was reiterated by the parents of Julie and Jack, who said that they felt 'guilty and embarrassed' about sending their children to the school. Nick and Rosie's parents shared incidents where they had to deal with negative comments and labelling, such as that "their children were under-privileged, retarded, back-ward, and problem children."

The effects of this contextual discourse caused these participants to be wary, and in some cases, even fearful of attending the school, and to be labelled as such. What these students and their parents' narratives show is that special needs education is often misunderstood by the public, and still stigmatised in South Africa (Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff & Swart, 2007). It also became evident from the interview data that neither the adolescents nor their parents thought of the school as being geared towards learners with special educational needs. However, this in itself revealed misunderstandings of the nature of special needs. Parents viewed special needs as relating to disability, which they felt had a negative connotation. This view is consistent with other research, which has shown that misunderstandings of disability still exist, and that the majority of people reject a stigmatised view of the self (Darling, 2013; Jahoda & Markova, 2004). According to Uys (2016), the definition of disability has evolved towards a social model that takes into consideration the influence of the social environment in defining and placing limitations on individuals with disabilities. However, disability is still viewed from the perspective of a more "individual model where the focus falls on limitations" (Uys, 2016:497), and this definition still features in important documents and as this study shows, also still features strongly in society.

The participants' views of themselves were negatively affected by the feedback they received on the community's view of the school. They felt 'different', and alienated in their community context. This state of affairs had far-reaching implications for a developing sense of self, especially since during the early stages of their schooling these learners had experienced feelings of inferiority because of experiences of rejection and labelling at their primary schools. Nick referred to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the perceptions of the community on the learners. This excerpt explains Nick's sentiment:

*It's about how the children act [at] the school. There is nothing wrong with them, people told them they are dumb so they acted dumb and did dumb things, like throw each other with stones and things like that. They never actually wanted to act mature ... because they believed what people told them.*

The participants conceded that the observable behaviour of some of the students who attended the school contributed to the learners being labelled as 'gangsters' and 'being thought of as a problem by the police' and contributed to the negative community discourse of the school. However, once the participants started settling into their school, and got to know their peers, their own experiences of the school began to counter the negative discourses of the community. Nick described the situation as follows:

*I was ... scared at first ... but once I experienced it I realised it's just like a normal school.*

Rosie likewise stated:

*I did not want to go to the school at first, because of what people were saying about it, but that changed after being at the school for some time.*

The two comments show that interpersonal and contextual factors played a role in shaping the change of experience in the participants. The data further indicated that their interactions with significant teachers and their peers were central to the contextual factors that played a role in participants' change in attitude towards the school.

**Teachers as Cheerleaders for a Healthy Self-Image**  
We found that teachers played an important part in the identity formation of these adolescents. The participants shared stories of how their relationships with their teachers influenced their self-image, and helped shift the negative community influences on self-identity. The teacher-learner relationship is a critical proximal process that has far-reaching consequences for the school experiences of children and adolescents. What our findings showed was that three participants developed a positive sense of self after experiencing motivating, supportive and nurturing relationships with teachers. Those who experienced an overall positive experience of their relationships with their teachers integrated aspects of those relationships into their sense of self. These teachers also provided positive reflections, which helped to build self-esteem not previously experienced at primary school. Nick expressed a sense of gratitude when he shared: "I can say thank you to that school, the teachers played a big role [...] [One teacher] put pressure on me to be a leader, a role model ... the pressure helped me." Rosie similarly emphasised the encouragement she received from her teachers, and especially the fact that teachers "helped [me] see the world differently [...] they saw things in me that I never saw in myself [...]" The teachers lifted my spirits and the children were nice to me." The positive mirroring by a significant adult helped the participants to mentally challenge the negative discourses and internalise a more positive view of self (Pfeifer, Lacoboni, Mazziotta & Dapretto, 2008), which is important in the development of resilience, but also for developing a sense of self.

These acts of caring from teachers stood in sharp contrast to participants' unhappy primary school experiences, where they perceived teachers as negative, and were frustrated with having to deal with their struggles to learn. It was thus a welcoming, even surprising, experience to feel valued and supported. Nick put it as follows: "I was actually shocked when a teacher at school actually stopped to help me when I struggled with a task."

Their sense of belonging was enhanced by being in a school where other learners had similar

capabilities to them, and where "othering" was less of a possibility. Rosie explains:

*I do not regret [going to that school] because I was with children who were on my level [...] I don't feel worthless anymore, because at primary school there were no children like me. I was the only one who was like this. But, when I came [to this school] everything changed. I started looking at myself differently and I could see a difference in myself, because the teachers uplifted me and the children treated me like I wanted to be treated, but at primary school it [was] very different.*

These adolescents, like many other learners with learning difficulties, were at the receiving end of exclusionary practices at their primary schools. This negatively influenced their self-concept and led to feelings of inadequacy. It thus appears that where there was a goodness of fit between teacher and student, it led to positive growth in the student. Research has shown that teachers who are caring and who are perceived as role models for the learners, have a significant impact on identity formation (Schachter & Rich, 2011), and that the quality of their relationships with learners can be considered more important than their academic competence (Dusek, 1987, cited in Stoop, 2005).

Teacher-student relationships, like other interpersonal relationships, are influenced by intrapersonal factors and the interactions between individuals in the relationship (Cornelius-White, 2007). In the case of the adolescents that we interviewed, their own personalities, personal histories and styles of relating to others definitely influenced the relationship. In the case of Jack, a mismatch between him and his teacher resulted in unhappy consequences for both parties. He will potentially be carrying consequences of this negative experience into life. Jack experienced adverse teacher interaction in the form of "corporal punishment and teachers not treating everyone equally." His memories of schooling were of feeling "unsafe" and that he had "wasted his years at the school." Jack's sentiments were that he had stagnated in terms of his education and that he felt "less than" other adolescents because of his school experiences. Jack's sentiments were echoed by his parents, who attributed his "state of inertia" to his schooling experience. This relates to the effect of teachers' relationships with students on achievement (Faircloth, 2012; Schachter & Rich, 2011; Sinai et al., 2012), well-being (Peck, Roeser, Zarett & Eccles, 2008), and school engagement (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010), which is well-documented.

#### Belonging and Finding a Place in the Group

Nick, Rosie, Jack and Julie's learning difficulties contributed to their disempowering experiences in primary school, and being 'othered' by their peers. Their narratives show that their experiences at the school of skills were different, and that their peers

play an important part in how they identify, and with whom. This is not unusual, and is in keeping with adolescent development theory, which emphasises the significant role of peers in the process of identity formation, especially in providing a sense of belonging which is a key factor in developing a sense of self as well as group identity (Kroger, 2007; Louw, A et al., 2007). What is different though, is that at the school of skills, most learners experience learning difficulties, where the playing fields are levelled. Learners like Rosie, Jack, Julie and Nick have an equal opportunity to compete, and to fit into the school culture, more so than what had been the case for them at their former schools. Their transition and assimilation into the school culture seemed smoother, as their peers now contributed to a sense of belonging at school. Rosie felt that she was “on the same level” as her peers and that she “[did not] feel worthless anymore because at primary school there were no children like [her].” Apart from experiencing a sense of belonging, participants also reported feeling understood by their peers. This encouraged participants to become more positive about themselves, especially in light of the sense of inferiority many of them felt after leaving primary school. This view is reflected in the response by Rosie: “at primary school, I felt misunderstood and different, but at the school of skills, people understood me.”

Our analysis of the data drawn upon showed that the role of interactions with peers significantly contributed to the way in which the participants made sense of their identity within the school context. Interactions with their peers provided opportunities for them to explore who they were as individuals. Nick explained how, when he became discouraged, and felt like giving up, his friends at school “would encourage me to give it one more day.” His experiences are validated by Rosie’s, who reported as follows on her relationships with her peers:

*We understood each other [...] this helped me to see that I could help someone else, which meant a lot to me, because I was always the one who was dependent on other people [at primary school].*

What was interesting in Jack’s case was that although he described his engagement with teachers as negative school experiences, this did not extend to his peers. He experienced a sense of belonging within his small group of friends. However, similar to what Suls, Martin and Wheeler (2002) describe as upward or downward social comparison, Jack described himself as belonging to a group of friends who were different to the others at the school: “we were a bunch that felt the same, we were the normal ones and they were the mad ones.” During break times, he and his friends “would sit together and watch the other learners almost as though [they] were on an island.” This phenomenon of downward social comparison was utilised by Jack to elevate his feelings about

himself, and is described as a defensive tendency to regard others as being worse off than oneself, in order to feel superior to others (Suls et al., 2002). Interestingly, Jack’s response suggests that he accepted the community’s view of the school as being for ‘mad’ children and his downward social comparison othered those not in his regular group of friends.

#### The Road Forward: Experiences of Their Future Orientation

Answering the question, ‘where am I going?’ is also pertinent to developing a healthy sense of identity. At the school of skills, there is recognition of the need to develop the individual beyond the intellectual. As such, part of the curriculum focuses on skills development. Nick, Julie, Jack and Rose reported having achieved some level of skill, which they felt they would not have had if they remained in the mainstream. For learners like Nick and Jack, who, in a mainstream school, might not have progressed beyond Grade 9, now experienced a sense of accomplishment. The participants felt that the ‘second chance’ after failure in the mainstream, and the opportunity to learn a skill and complete school, contributed to a more positive sense of self. This is illustrated in Nick’s perception of his school experiences:

*I had the opportunity to finish school and pick up an extra skill [...] I was able to go one step further [...] Failing twice at primary school opened my eyes ... it made me say, 'I'm not gonna back down and nothing is going to keep me back!' [...] That school motivated me to go for it, to not slack and lay back; that school gave me another chance to do it again and now I am going further [...] At first I was scared to go there 'cause of what people said, but they didn't know what was really going on [...] That school made me positive about myself.*

It appears that the participants’ primary school experiences of failure and unsupportive teachers affected their ability to develop a sense of industry or a sense of I can do at least one activity well, which, according to Erikson’s theory, should be resolved during these early school years. One can therefore argue that the participant’s progression to adolescence, where an identity crisis needs to be resolved, was stunted, or that their trajectory of identity formation was different. In making meaning of where they came from, it appears that for most of the participants, their school experiences at a school of skills provided them with opportunities to explore alternative ways of thinking about themselves, and thus supported their process of identity formation.

Similar to other current research, this serves to confirm that identity formation is not a strict linear process, and that when support structures are in place, earlier psychosocial tasks can be achieved. Based on the way in which the participants’ sense of identity changed over time, it can be said that

identity cannot be regarded as a fixed entity; instead, it is constantly influenced by the commitments one makes and by the response of others. The participants' interaction with making meaning of their sense of self further relates to the contemporary view of identity, which maintains that individuals are becoming more self-reflexive in deciding which aspects of their identity they wish to keep, and which to reject.

Although the acquired skills were considered to be useful for their future, they were struggling with the transition from school to the world of work. They felt unsure of their next steps and attributed this feeling of uncertainty to the school's lack of support in their school-to-work transition:

*I liked learning a skill, but what now? (Jack)*  
*[It] feels like there [are] only closed doors for them. I feel that the education department has failed our children [...] Where to now? [one of Rosie's parents]*

Not being supported in settling on vocational goals and choices led the participants to question themselves; consequently, they were unable to gain a clear sense of their future. Participants in the study showed evidence that supports Hirschi's (2011) view that such individuals are more likely to develop a negative self-view, which consequently affects their ability and motivation to explore possible opportunities. This is especially reflected in the responses to the question, 'what now?' The vocational domain of identity is described as being a source of meaningfulness for adolescents (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012); therefore, even though most of the participants experienced a more positive sense of self as a result of their experiences within the school, not settling on a vocational identity of future orientation significantly influenced their sense of self in terms of their trajectory after school. The school-to-work transition for adolescents needs to be adequately supported by all role-players involved in schools of skills, because it has significant implications for adolescent efficacy, decision-making abilities, and coping skills (Ng & Feldman, 2007). On the other hand, it seemed as if the participants had expected that their vocational skill would provide them with a job, and that the school of skills would transport them into the world of work. However, it should be taken into account that the participants may have had unrealistic expectations, because it is not uncommon for adolescents in general to feel uncertain about their place in the world of work.

Moreover, while most of the participants appeared to construct a more positive sense of self in relation to their experiences at a school of skills, Jack reported a very different perspective. He described himself as a "no-one, with nothing behind my name." Similar to the other participants, Jack reported having experienced difficulties at primary school. It appears that he and his parents felt that they were given false expectations, and

therefore expressed feelings of regret regarding his attendance at a school of skills. This finding highlights the need for learners and parents to be properly informed about the nature of the school, and to be respectfully included in the placement decisions of their children. This might also be interpreted as a lack of fit, as described by Booth and Gerard (2014). In their study, Booth and Gerard found that "boys' conversations focused more on the frustrations resulting from their relationships and interactions with peers and teachers. Their examples depict males whose feelings of self-efficacy appear to be influenced negatively by an environment which is frustrating, illustrating a lack of fit" (2014:11). It is thus likely that Jack's attitude toward school is associated with a "lack of personal control" (Booth & Gerard, 2014:11).

This recalls Erikson's observation that not settling on an occupational identity can be the most disturbing experience for adolescents (Erikson, 1968). As Jack noted, "you are a nothing without a job." Erikson (1968:127) explains that the choice of an occupation effectively goes further than the benefits of remuneration and status. Essentially it is about "the immediate contribution of the school to a sense of identity [that] can be expressed in the words I am what I can make work" (Erikson, 1968:127). Our findings therefore substantiate that being able to choose an occupation and do something meaningful with one's life is central to an adolescent's sense of identity, and that the school of skills has not sufficiently facilitated this in the participants.

### Conclusion

We conclude from our research that identity formation is indeed complex in nature, and that the school of skills context can play a significant role in the process of adolescent identity formation. This research emphasises the importance of interpersonal relationships within a school of skills, especially their potential to communicate care and a sense of belonging. When these relationships are perceived as positive, they can serve as a mirror to reflect a positive self that is internalised by the adolescent. This in turn can lead to a positive sense of self.

However, the marginal status of schools of skills needs urgent attention, as this can have a significant effect on how learners who attend schools of skills make sense of their identity. South African communities, especially those who did not receive special education services under the apartheid government, need to be informed of the purpose of special schools in the education system and be educated about various barriers to learning to counter their negative and prejudiced discourses.

This research highlights that schools of skills are potentially valuable resources, with the

potential to lead to positive identity formation for learners, so that they see possibilities for themselves in the world of work, as well as possibilities to be active participants in the South African economy, while feeling equipped to contribute positively to their families and communities. However, the findings suggest that attention needs to be given to a possible lack of information about the qualification that education at a school of skills will provide, as well as about practical guidance, in the form of support for how the qualification might be utilised in the transition from school to work.

Since the findings of this study are based on the subjective experiences of the participants and constitutes their construction of reality, further research into this context could provide other insights on the role of schools of skills in identity formation.

#### Note

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