Learner identity is a complex phenomenon that emerges and changes over time within varied historical, social, cultural and relational contexts.

Imagine learning as a flowing river1: on the surface are the explicit subjects and topics we identify as valuable and encourage children to engage with, while below the surface are the various forms of expertise that enable children to comprehend, discuss and engage with the top level of knowledge and information. In the depths of the river (a space that is harder to see and understand but that underpins all learning) is the domain of learner identity. This encompasses the attitudes and habits that influence learning and the ways in which children come to understand themselves as learners. The purpose of education is not simply the transaction of knowledge but the construction of identities that will serve children positively throughout their learning journey. It is important for teachers to ask: how can my pedagogical activity positively affect children's sense of themselves as learners?

Early childhood educators working with a bi-cultural, play-based, child-led, and emergent curriculum framework can consider learner identity in relation to a child's personal interests (funds of knowledge), and reflect on how they can support these interests in meaningful ways that will foster positive learner identities in the children they work with.[2] This resource sets out to:

- articulate what is meant by 'learner identity'

- explore what a positive learner identity might look like

- examine how teachers can support the development of positive learner identities in local contexts

It is important to note that what we consider to be a positive learner identity may vary from setting to setting, as it will be mediated by localised curriculum and specific cultural contexts. It is important not to position particular positive learner identities as superior to others, but to identify important attributes for a child's ongoing life and learning and to implement teaching strategies that encourage positive learner identities and orientations.

What do we mean by 'learner identity'?

The notion of learner identity can be understood as the development of attitudes and habits that influence the learning process, and the emerging and constantly developing ways in which children understand themselves as learners. These attitudes and orientations towards learning can manifest both positively and negatively, so it is important for teachers to foster the development of identities that are positive about learning, and that create the conditions for children's self-motivated future learning and engagement with a broad and balanced curriculum.[3] Researchers argue that these positive orientations towards learning are just as valuable as the more easily measurable domains of content knowledge and skills, and indeed that they are meaningful learning outcomes in their own right.[4] In other words, a positive learner identity is both an enabler and an outcome of a child's education.

What does a positive learner identity look like?

The research identifies one of the key aspects of a positive learner identity as a child's ability to tackle and persist with challenge.[5] This means that, when inevitable challenges and setbacks arise in the learning environment, children are able to focus their efforts on strategies to overcome these challenges rather than worrying that they are incompetent. This creative and self-motivated orientation towards educational challenges creates the conditions for children to demonstrate resilience in their learning.

Another key attribute for a positive learner identity is the child's sense of agency. Fostering a sense of agency in young learners allows the child to feel empowered and to take a leadership role in relation to their learning and development. Research has found that positive learner identities are more likely to be sustained if teachers help to position learners as the authors of their own learning trajectories.

Positive learner identity may be conceptualised in terms of 'learning wisdom'[6], or knowing why, what, when and how to learn: in other words, being ready, willing and able to engage in the learning process. Research has identified five key learning wisdom domains that young children balance and negotiate as they develop their knowledge and their attitudes and orientations towards learning (although these domains could be reframed to reflect different contexts):

- **Kindness**: learning to balance the perspectives of themselves, others, and the group, as well as independence and interdependence

- **Dialogue**: balancing speaking and activity in various ways, such as balancing dialogue and doing, or observing and participating

- **Resourcefulness**: negotiating the usefulness of resources and balancing imaginative engagement with resources with a recognition of its intended purpose

- **Expertise**: balancing multiple selves, such as learner, friend, sibling, explorer, investigator

- **Focus and flow**: balancing challenge and ability, absorption and reflection; and managing distractions to optimise flow or deep engagement with the learning environment

How can teachers support the development of positive learner identities?

In order to encourage positive orientations towards learning, teachers need to take an active role. Effective teachers understand what learning is valued in their context and practise intentional teaching in relation to this valued learning. Through intentional pedagogical activity, early years teachers can encourage children to approach and revisit their learning in meaningful, self-determining ways. The research identifies the following teaching strategies and attributes as important for the cultivation of positive learner identities in young children.

Respectful and reciprocal dialogue

Integrating meaningful dialogue with children throughout daily activity is a great way to encourage a positive learner identity in the children we work with. Teachers can employ respectful and reciprocal dialogue to promote a sense of agency in children by demonstrating that children's intentional actions as learners have an impact on their environment. Reciprocal dialogue with teachers also helps children develop an understanding that their activities are valued by others in the learning community.

Developing and sustaining respectful relationships as the basis of open dialogue with learners is essential, as research identifies strong links between emotionally engaged teacher-child relationships and a child's future academic, social and behavioral outcomes.[7] Respectful and reciprocal dialogue between teachers and learners can also open up a space for shared sustained thinking to develop.[8]

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When teachers take children's questions seriously and work in collaboration with children to extend their questions in meaningful ways, it helps to build positive learner identities by validating children's inquiries.

There are some specific strategies that teachers can use as the basis of respectful and reciprocal dialogue with children to encourage positive orientations towards learning and articulate what it means to be *ready*, *willing*, and *able* to engage in the learning process. Teachers can:

- use particular language to support children to see themselves as learners and understand their activities as learning. For example: 'wow, I'm so impressed with the way you are working with the wooden blocks Amy… I can see how the shapes and forms you are constructing are developing over time. You are learning and practising the skills involved in design, building, architecture - you are creating your environment'.

- develop key **terms** or **sayings** in response to a child's interests/funds of knowledge as well as their own learning as teachers. For example, once we have recognised that Amy has a sustained interest in constructing forms with the wooden blocks, we might develop a repertoire of specific language around that interest: 'Mōrena Amy, what might we **design** and **construct** in the block corner today?' or 'Amy, your **constructions** yesterday inspired me to research and learn about some different styles of **architecture** and **design**. I have printed some images for us to look at together'.

- model language use in relation to the learning process by talking explicitly about their own learning: teachers can wonder out loud, talk explicitly about being stuck on an idea or activity, or articulate the ways in which they might overcome a challenge. For example: 'Amy, **I was so curious** about the range of materials used in different architecture. **I wondered about** how big buildings in the city can have so much glass in them. I found some books on engineering and architecture in the library and **discovered** that these buildings need to use steel instead of wood to hold the weight of all that glass'.

- paraphrase and use 'phatics' (mmhmm, uh-huh, ahhh, wow) rather than direct questions, which can have the effect of reducing the complexity of the learning process to a single interpretation

Physical space and materials

The research on learner identity also illustrates the significance of physical space and the material environment in relation to children developing an understanding of themselves as learners.[9] By creating spaces and introducing material resources to the learning environment that are responsive to children's developing interests, teachers can assist children in developing positive attitudes and orientations towards learning. Identifying children's interests as they manifest in the material environment and actively working to extend these interests enables teachers to strengthen children's identities as learners by recognising and valuing their activity as valid, self-initiated learning that is foundational for future knowledge acquisition. Displays can also help facilitate and prompt daily conversations about children's learning trajectories and the learner identities that are valued in your particular educational setting. Teachers can:

- observe the material objects and physical activities that children are drawn to in expressing and pursuing their diverse interests

- design a physical space that allows for an open exploration of particular material object or activity to which children are drawn

- consider what other materials or resources could be introduced to enable the child to extend or experiment with this interest

• make locally valued learner identities explicit through the use of documentation and display boards in the educational environment

Connections between early childhood settings and home

It is important for children to be able to negotiate different contexts such as home and their early childhood setting, and to see themselves as learners in these various contexts. Research has found that the child's capacity to recognise learning opportunities and to use their learning in new contexts is enhanced if there is clear communication between the early childhood education setting and the child's home,[10] and that the social spaces of a child's life are of fundamental importance to the construction of their learner identity. Central to this process is the sharing of culturally diverse perspectives that may impact on educational provision in the early years.

It is important to consider how teaching practices might support these diverse social spaces and integrate them in the learning environment in meaningful ways. Teachers can:

• use learning stories to explore the multiple social worlds of children and enable communication across these worlds[11] and help teachers and parents develop a shared understanding concerning the child's identity as a learner.

• use learning stories as a valuable learning resource full of culturally mediated texts, images and symbols that can be used to explore future learning opportunities with children

• actively work to develop a warm and welcoming rapport with a child's whanau that supports open dialogue and regular communication. This might be as simple as meaningful and engaged daily greetings, or expressing an interest in whanau members' lives outside the educational environment.

Assessment

As well as being a useful bridge between the home and centre environment, the Learning Story assessment framework can also be used by early years teachers as a means of developing children's understanding of themselves as learners, as they are 'live' documents that children can interact with and contribute to as active producers of their own learning trajectories. Research has found that children will seek out and spontaneously revisit their profile books/portfolios (collections of learning stories developed over time), opening up opportunities for teachers to intentionally engage with children's learning journeys and encourage positive identities and attitudes towards learning.[12] Teachers can:

• ensure that profile books and portfolios are readily accessible to children

• work with children in relation to their profile books to revisit particular conversations and themes prompted by the children's reflections on their learning stories

• test out various conversational strategies while semi-formally and intentionally revisiting learning stories and discuss 'what next' with the children. For example, using paraphrasing, open questioning and 'phatics' (mmhmm, uh-huh, ahhh, wow) as opposed to direct or closed questioning

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Endnotes

1 Claxton, 2018.

2 Hedges, 2018.

3 Carr et al., 2008.

4 Claxton, 2018.

5 Carr & Lee, 2011; Claxton, 2018.

6 Carr & Lee, 2011.

7 O'Brien & Blue, 2018.

8 Blatchford, 2010.

9 Carr & Lee, 2012; O'Brien & Blue, 2018; Wenger, 1999.

10 Carr & Lee, 2012; Hedges, 2018; Wenger, 1999.

11 Carr & Lee, 2012.

12 Carr & Lee, 2011.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY

Daniel Whitaker

Daniel is an educator and researcher-artist based in Wellington, Aotearoa-New Zealand. His research critically and creatively examines photographic practices in the context of educational research. This research explores the potential of process-based methodologies, with a particular interest in how the meeting of philosophical and artistic practice can construct new forms of knowing and being. Daniel strongly believes in the transformative power of educational research/theory, and is passionate about making this work accessible for practicing teachers.

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