

## Mead's Contributions to Learner's Identities

---

### Contribuciones de Mead a las identidades del alumnado

Suzanne Gatt\*, Ignasi Puigdemívol\*\* and Silvia Molina\*\*\*

\*University of Malta, \*\*Universitat de Barcelona, \*\*\*Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona)

**Abstract:** Mead's approach of symbolic interactionism is useful for explaining both how students learn and how learning environments can be improved. This article reviews Mead's theoretical contributions, which serve as a base for successful educational actions in several countries. The interactionist view of learning is examined in depth, as well as the dialogical nature of the self, and the way that verbal language and gestures mediate interaction. These concepts are illustrated with examples from case studies of successful schools, which show the didactic consequences each of these dialogic premises have: emphasise dialogue as a basic tool in educational interactions and coordinate actions between all the people students interact with, inside and outside schools. These interactions and dialogues impact students' development of their identities as learners.

*Key words:* interactions, identity, learning, self.

---

**Resumen:** El interaccionismo simbólico de Mead sirve tanto para entender cómo las y los estudiantes aprenden como para mejorar los entornos de aprendizaje. Este artículo revisa las contribuciones teóricas de este autor que están actualmente en la base de las actuaciones educativas de más éxito a nivel internacional. Se profundiza teóricamente en la visión interaccionista del aprendizaje, la dialogicidad constituyente de la persona, y la interacción mediada por el lenguaje verbal y los gestos. Estos conceptos se ilustran con ejemplos de estudios de casos de escuelas de éxito, que muestran las implicaciones didácticas que tienen cada una de esas premisas dialógicas: enfatizar el diálogo como herramienta básica de las interacciones educativas y coordinar acciones con todas las personas con las que se relacionan las y los estudiantes dentro y fuera de los centros educativos, así como lo que esas interacciones y diálogos significan para la identidad de las y los estudiantes.

*Palabras clave:* interacciones, identidad, aprendizaje, persona.

---

Correspondence: Silvia Molina Roldán. Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Departament de Pedagogia. Carretera de Valls s/n, 43007, Tarragona, Spain ([silvia.molina@urv.cat](mailto:silvia.molina@urv.cat))

## INTRODUCTION

Interaction and dialogue are key elements that help students learn. Educational psychologists, including [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#) and [Bruner \(1996\)](#), have theorised how students' interactions with teachers and other adults, and amongst themselves, help students to learn and to develop psychologically. In this article, we analyse interactions and dialogue in learning contexts and processes to focus on the impact they have on the construction of students' identities as learners. We base our analysis on Mead's (1934) theory on the development of the *self*.

Various elements influence any student's beliefs about his or her ability: she may think to be a good or poor student, good at maths but poor at music, or he may believe he will become a doctor or will never be able to go to university. Among these elements are others' attitudes about their learning process, their own expectations about themselves and how they are perceived, the classroom practices at their school, and the complexity of the learning tasks they are asked to fulfil. All these elements result from interactions and situations within the conversations students have with other students and adults—either through verbal language or through other non-verbal communicative signs. These interactions and dialogues influence the students' perceptions of themselves as learners and contribute, positively or negatively, to creating their identity as learners. This identity has an impact on their performance and their academic achievement. Therefore it is valuable to analyse how students interact and how they create meanings in their learning contexts to see how these processes can contribute to creating positive identities among learners. Then educators can encourage the situations, interactions, and educational practices that best contribute to shaping positive identities and promote higher levels of learning.

In this article we review Mead's understanding of the development of the *self* and connect his theoretical premises with evidence collected in the empirical research project INCLUD-ED (2006-2011). This integrated project, funded by the European Commission under its Sixth Framework Programme of research, is the only such project devoted to analysing school education. The project focuses on educational strategies that help overcome inequalities and promote social cohesion, as well as on those that generate social exclusion, focusing particularly on vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Within the INCLUD-ED framework, case studies of successful educational actions in European schools have been conducted. These are school practices that contribute to students succeeding in schools located in disadvantaged socio-economic contexts and with a high percentage of students of minority or immigrant backgrounds. In this article, we analyse these educational actions with respect to the learning interactions they promote, the type

of communication they foster about learning, their impact on students' identities as learners, and how these identities influence their learning achievement. Throughout this article we offer quotations from parents, teachers, and other people involved in these schools.

## INTERACTION AND DIALOGUE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF LEARNERS' IDENTITIES

According to Mead (1934), people create meanings of realities through social interaction, and language plays a key role in this process. Gestures are social acts that stimulate reactions from others. These reactions, in turn, become a stimulus for others, and, through appropriate reactions to others' gestures, people establish a cooperative activity. This gives rise to a conversation of gestures, which is the beginning of communication, and is related to meaning creation. Based on this social process and the reflection it entails, people develop what he calls mind and self-consciousness. According to Mead, this is also the basis for creating the *self*, which occurs when the social process becomes part of the experience of those involved in it. As individuals reflect within these social processes, they develop their selves.

To Mead, a person's *self* is more than an individual organism; it emerges from social experience, from this communication based on gestures. Within the *self*, there are two different processes: the *me*, which is social and incorporates others' attitudes, and the *I*, which reacts to these attitudes as the conscious part of the *self*. Both parts are necessary for the development of the *self*, as no person or identity can develop out of a social group without incorporating the attitudes of the social group or community to which they belong. Social interaction is the basis on which people create social meaning, and particularly the meaning they give to themselves. For this reason, we interpret Mead's conception of the *self* as dialogic, since it is constructed within constant interaction and dialogue with others.

Because the *self* has this social dimension, each person constructs her or his *self* in a unique way. People live and interact in very different contexts and with different people and groups. In each context and with each group of people we do different things and talk about different topics. Interactions are different and therefore the attitudes of others that we incorporate into our *me* are also different. The result is that our *self* does not develop homogeneously during every moment and aspect of our lives. In Mead's words, the whole *self* is made up of different elemental selves which are constructed in the different social contexts where we find ourselves, with the different persons or social groups we meet and in the different types of interactions we participate in. The image of us that others project on to us, and the gestures

to which we react, are different in each case and connect to different facets of ourselves. We incorporate these images into our *me*, and our *I* will react to them accordingly. In these dialogues between our *me* and our *I*, we create our different identities. Thus we create complex selves, as we each develop various aspects of our identities in various contexts.

School is one of the common contexts of social life, one where children spend a large proportion of their time. In school, children interact with others, both peers and adults. Most of the interactions taking place within the school are educational. The school, therefore, contributes to creating one of the elemental selves: the children's identity as learners. Other contexts apart from the school, such as the child's home or circle of friends, also contribute to creating this *self* and other elemental selves besides those of a learner. For example, when a child is with his group of friends he can develop a positive perception of *self* as his friends see him as a likeable funny boy who is good at telling jokes. As a result, he will enjoy being with his friends because he knows they like him, he will have fun with them, he will enjoy saying funny things to them, and his friends will want more and more to be in his company.

Turning to a different social context in the school, the same child can have a different perception of himself as a learner. Imagine that he is in the lower level group for maths, where the teacher often says that he has difficulty and will never be able to master the division of numbers. As a consequence, the child develops a negative conception of his *self* as a mathematician. He does not like going to school, especially to maths class, he does not pay attention in class, and he will disturb other students and not make progress in the subject. When he goes home, he will not even try to do his homework, as he will prefer to go out and have a good time with his friends. Then his parents may think that he is not responsible, which will contribute to the idea that he is a poor student overall. Moreover, if his parents do not have much experience of school and cannot help him with his homework, they may see no way to change this situation and believe he will never be able to succeed at school. Also, if his parents cannot help him because they themselves never learnt how to do division, the boy may also think it is not that important for him to learn it. The child's interactions in school, such as those with teachers, influence him and cannot be separated from his interactions in other contexts like the home, where the effects of these interactions can be transferred and even reproduced.

The example of this boy shows how people's different identities are constructed in different contexts. The boy's identity as a friend was created through his interaction with his group of friends, his identity as a learner was constructed through the interactions in the school and his identity as a son was created in the interactions at home. But elements of the same identity

can be created in interactions in different contexts. For this boy, his overall identity as a good or bad learner is built through interactions at both school and home. Children develop these different identities in each context as they participate in, and react to, through conversations of gestures—both verbal and non verbal—with relevant others. In this case, there are various gestures that take place in the school context, including low teacher expectations and non-challenging course material. He responds to these gestures by making other gestures—showing little motivation in school or interest in homework—and these become a stimulus for his parents to react, with the belief that their son is not a good student. In turn, their reaction has an impact on him, reinforcing his negative identity as a learner. Thus this communication of gestures continues, and the communicative process progressively shapes the boy's *self* as one that is not successful at school.

Some of the successful educational actions examined by the INCLUD-ED project (CREA, 2008a, 2008b, 2009) specifically highlight the importance of connecting the home and the school to promote students' learning. Students' positive identities as learners are promoted when both contexts—the home and the school—are in dialogue, and can coordinate their actions and reach agreement on the child's education. One important element the project has documented is families and community members participating actively in the school, in decision-making processes and family and community education activities, as well as in the classroom. For example, when children's relatives are involved in adult family education activities in the school, they all have a new opportunity to share both learning spaces and knowledge, as this teacher explains:

The mother brings the folder containing the vocabulary sheets and the child brings their folder containing their homework sheets; they can often talk about the same things (...). The mum and the child are experiencing an academic situation [together] and they can interact. [They can say] well I have helped you or at least ask each other what they have been doing. If the child is more motivated, he or she will learn more.

One consequence of family and community participation is that it brings the child's school and home contexts closer to each other, and thus facilitates increased coordination between the home and the school. When it is possible to coordinate all the activities in which the community, families, and the school are involved, children experience similar interactions around learning in the school and in the home; then the communicative gestures from both contexts send similar messages about the importance of schooling and reinforce the same image of children as learners.

For children, this means that teachers, parents, and other members of the school staff and the community have common purposes regarding their edu-

cation. They all offer contexts that help the children build and reinforce positive images of themselves as learners. Children come to understand that their education is very important to their teachers and families and to the families of the other children and everyone else from the community who spends time at the school. In this way, the attitudes of teachers, families, and the community toward education and learning keep students focused on the importance of school and learning. Children realise that all these people believe that they are capable of learning more and learning it well, and this influences their perception of themselves as students and helps them construct positive identities as learners. This kind of coordination among the various people involved in the school lets students create new meanings about the experience of going to school (Flecha, 2009). As one mother participating in a school explains:

Imagine for a boy, how important it would be for his father to come to contribute everything he knows to his school, no? It's like saying, look, I am here in a place which is important and my father is going to share what I do with me (...). It is relating what they tell you at home with what they tell you at school, they are not two things which are parallel to each other and which never come together, no? They are two things which go together. In other words, what I say to you as a mother and what the teacher says to you, we are working together for your good and for your education.

When families participate in children's learning activities in the classroom, children perceive that their education is important to others and it also becomes important to them. The students' behaviour improves, their concentration increases, and they feel they have no time to waste being inattentive or annoying their classmates. The students themselves acknowledge this change of attitude, which stems from the change in the classroom interactions; they incorporate it as a part of their *self* as learners, and thus want to show it to the others. As a Romani girl explains, when families are included in the classroom, the children behave better: «We [behave] well because we want to show them that we are good». Children enjoy showing and sharing their learning and work with adults, particularly families of children attending the school, even if these are not their own parents. As a result, they spend more time on educational interactions and less time on irrelevant issues. Children learn more, and they also learn that they can be capable learners.

Motivation is another aspect that is transformed when family and community members participate in schools, transforming students' identities to those of «good learners» who are motivated and want to learn. Undoubtedly, extra motivation has a direct impact on students' performance; this is clear

from the case studies. They are more motivated to learn when relatives participate in decision-making processes in the school or in family education activities. As a mother explains:

If the child has difficulties, for example in Catalan, and since his or her mother is already becoming literate and he or she is already aware of that, well there is support at home. And [with] children like that, it encourages them because, as we know, then they can help the children so that they like to study even more.

When relatives participate in learning activities, aimed at either children or families, this participation raises their motivation to learn and changes learning-related habits at home. When children and family members start to share learning activities at school, they easily transfer them to the home environment and then start to share more activities, such as reading books or doing homework. The family education gives relatives more opportunities to help their children with their homework, and they are now more comfortable sharing learning activities. This approach makes it possible to transform situations like that of the boy whose parents know he is not doing well at math, but cannot help him. By participating in learning activities, the family members gain more knowledge and more strategies to help their children—and also gain more confidence that their children can learn. This is incorporated in the child's self-identity as a learner when they interact over the shared learning activities.

Thus it is clear that empowering families through education improves the self-identity of the families as learners; it also provides them with the skills and competences they need to help their children with their schoolwork. They start to have higher expectations for their children, and the children also develop positive self-identities (INCLUD-ED Consortium, 2009). The positive attitudes transfer from the parents to the children. Thus the whole family is transformed, not just the child.

### **THE ROLE OF THE «GENERALISED OTHER» IN LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

The attitudes that the social group (or groups) we belong to have towards us constitute what Mead calls the «generalised other». The generalised other includes everything that others think about us and transmit to us through our interactions with them. It includes their ideas of what we are like, what we like, what we can and cannot do, and what they expect of us. The generalised other is the way that the others live with us and «inside us», as it is the way

in which we incorporate them into our *me*, constituting the social part of the *self*. It is what the *I* reacts to, as an expression of our *self*.

The generalised other gives us a way to understand the role that expectations play in students' learning. Expectations develop through the images that we create about what we can or cannot do, according to others' beliefs about our capabilities. Decades ago, researchers ([Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968](#)) had already demonstrated the relationship between expectations of students' learning and the huge impact on their final learning outcomes. Mead's conception of the *self* helps explain the process through which we incorporate these expectations of others and they thus influence our performance. According to Mead, the expectations are first in the other persons' minds, in what they think and expect from us. Through dialogue and interaction, we incorporate the images, attitudes and expectations they have of us—the generalised other—and from that moment they become part of the *me*, and also of the *self*. They are no longer the others' expectations, but have now also become «our» expectations, and our *I* will act and react according to them. From the moment we are aware of what others think and expect of us, we cannot avoid making it part of ourselves and thus acting according to it. Our *I* and *me* engage in constant dialogue; thus the *self* becomes individual and social at the same time, also incorporating the others in our actions and thoughts.

One consequence of others' expectations is that they have a significant impact on our performance, because we have internalised these expectations, making real the self-fulfilling prophecy of the Pygmalion effect. This is what happens in our example of the boy who is appreciated by his friends but has trouble learning how to divide. His friends will increasingly think of him as a likeable, friendly, funny boy, because he knows (*me*) they already think that, and he is acting as a likeable, friendly, funny boy (*generalised other*). His friends are reinforcing these characteristics and he is acting in response to this (*I*). Meanwhile, he will have worse and worse experiences in maths class, because he has internalised the low expectations of his teacher and parents (*generalised other*). Just like them, he now believes that he is not a good student, that he will never succeed at maths, and that it is not worth spending time on that (*me*), and he is acting in response to it (*I*).

If social reality is socially constructed, in interaction with others, then our identity, which is both social and individual, is also constructed this way. If the meanings of social reality are created through language and communication of gestures, the meanings we give to our actions also depend on this communication process. Whether this boy thinks he is a good or poor student—and the reasons he thinks so—will depend on the meanings that the others give to his academic performance, and on the meaning he gives to his teacher's comments about him and the fact that he was placed in the lower-level group.

Specific school practices do affect students' expectations; this has been confirmed by teachers in the INCLUD-ED case studies. In particular, children's negative academic expectations are associated with the streaming practices that separate students according to their achievement level and provide less content for the lower streams. As one of these teachers explains:

Before we also had flexible groups, for Catalan, group A, B and C. The thing is that they were divided based on their [academic] level, you see? A had more children... and it was assumed that A would do the whole book, B (...) almost the whole book, and C even less.

In this case, teachers had different expectations for the different groups. The children internalized these different expectations, and categorised themselves as learners based on the group where they were placed. The teachers also translated these different expectations into a «teaching of minimums»; that is, for the lower groups they reduced the amount and challenge of the learning materials. This leads to the children in the lower groups performing less well; over time, the differences in performance between the upper and lower groups increase. Similarly, schools offered segregated reception classes for immigrants, but these had a negative effect on the students' conceptions of themselves and thus on their academic attainment. Two teachers discussed the experience of one immigrant student:

María: He goes out, goes into the reception class and the rest of the time he's in the normal class but he cannot do anything in class because... he has nothing to do...

Elena: He does not respond to the stimulus (...)

Maria: (...) I gave him a book from third year, a social sciences book, and at least, starting with looking at the animals and then trying to read things and he now spends the whole day with that book.

As we see here, for both the students in the low-level group and the migrant student in the reception class, the *generalised other* includes attitudes towards them that involve treating them as different from the other students. Because of these attitudes, and because they are only offered the curriculum of minimums, they perceive that they need to learn different content in different places. This leads them to feel that they are not part of the same group, and that they are not expected to do the same work, or not capable of doing it—even when they are in class with the others, as in the example of the migrant student. On the other hand, other evidence shows that when teachers, parents, and classmates all have high expectations and teachers offer a «curriculum of maximums», the students internalise these higher expectations, and as they build their own perceptions of themselves as capable learners,

they start expressing the desire to continue their studies and go to university (CREA, 2008a). These high expectations become translated into greater motivation, which further promotes their learning and leads them to achieve more. The children have gone through a transformation and it has made them believe in themselves.

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE DIMENSION OF MEAD'S DIALOGIC SELF

Mead's theory on the social construction of the *self* explains how identities are shaped. Even more important, by understanding how selves are created we also learn how they can be transformed. The *self* depends on interaction and dialogue with others; therefore, if these interactions are transformed, the *me* in each of our selves that internalises the other persons is also transformed. Through the interactions and communications in school classrooms and other learning contexts, students create meaning about the educational context and practices, and about the learning possibilities for themselves; they then internalise these meanings, and the entire process has an impact on their learning performance. Educators can redefine and organise situations and interactions so that they transform students' identities as learners into positive ones and thus promote their learning.

This leads us to a transformative dimension of Mead's *self*, a dimension that is the result of the *self* being created in the dialogue between the *me* and the *I*, between us and the others. This transformative dimension represents Mead's major contribution to education, as it facilitates interventions that can transform and improve the teaching context and students' learning conditions and chances of success. Mead's perspective involves analysing learning processes starting from the perspective that the *self* is dialogic and that students construct their identities as learners through a social process. This phenomenon allows—indeed forces—teachers and other educational agents to reflect on and decide which school practices, didactic approaches and organisational measures to implement. Such decisions are crucial, given that students interact with these elements in a communicative process that creates relevant meanings for them which they can then internalise and transform themselves.

Two types of elements in the educational context influence students' identities as learners: interactions between students and significant others in their learning process, and the overall school practices and didactic interventions. In both elements, people interact and communicate, both verbally and non-verbally, and these processes influence students. When the interactions between students, teachers, classmates, and family members are

changed, based on high expectations, the students' motivation increases, their self-images and self-confidence improve, and their performance improves. When schools choose not to segregate and label students according to their current level of achievement but instead offer more opportunities for all of them to get help and catch up, the school context is speaking to students with a language of possibilities rather than one of difficulties and barriers. The same occurs when learning materials and objectives are not watered down for those at a low achievement level but instead the same curriculum is offered to everyone. The children incorporate this language of possibilities into themselves and it transforms their identities as learners. Then, if as a result of these transformations, the students realise that they really are making progress, that reinforces their positive image as learners (Díez-Palomar & Flecha, 2010).

Analyses conducted in INCLUD-ED have made it possible to identify successful educational actions that improve students' learning. In doing so, these practices are shaping learners' positive identities and vice versa: high expectations, positive attitudes, and supportive interactions with children promote their learning because the children internalise them. When schools move away from streaming —organising students into homogeneous level groups— but instead group students heterogeneously, mixing different levels of attainment, and including the support of additional people in the classroom, all students can work on the same activities and have the support they need to do well. When all children are expected to work on the same activities and the teacher does not differentiate among them, they cannot incorporate different expectations and attitudes. In this case, then, the generalised other includes an image that all the students are capable of completing the activities they are asked to do. A relative of a student in one of these schools explains this:

The other things are forgotten, and I think that the most important thing is to see that, you see? To see that there is neither the Venezuelan nor the Moroccan, nor the one who knows more, nor the one who knows less.

Grouping students into heterogeneous groups offers them the conditions where they can meet high expectations, and thus learn more. This happens because additional support is included in the classroom and the students themselves, given their different levels of attainment, also become a source of help. One girl explains how it works in her class:

We mix them up because for example there are quite a few who know quite a lot and there are some who don't know so much. Therefore those who do know, well they help those who don't know so much... And therefore,

well, those who do not know try harder, or ask for help and, and it works quite well.

Another source of support for enhancing students' learning is the after-hours extracurricular activities offered by some schools. There, students can get the support they need to do their homework or engage in other learning-related activities. These activities help to transform the learning context, the resources and the interactions there, and facilitating students' learning. Schools that offer these activities do not make their pedagogical decisions based on current and stable identities of learners as low or high achievers; instead, they base their decisions on the premise that identities can be transformed. This transformation occurs if the learning context, practices, and interactions are also transformed so they provide the means to improve students' learning. As a result, each student's *self* becomes one that believes they are capable of learning. Then, indeed, students do learn and achieve more.

### **STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND DISABILITIES: CONTRIBUTIONS OF DIALOGIC LEARNING CONTEXTS TO THEIR IDENTITIES AS LEARNERS**

Although the practical implications of the transformative *self* help improve the learning of all students, students who have specific learning difficulties and disabilities stand to benefit more from practices like those described here. These students rarely have positive identities as learners. They are used to hearing —and to experiencing practices that imply— that they are not capable of learning in the same way, and as quickly, as other children their age. Although individual elements may influence and even limit these children's possibilities of learning, there are other elements that depend on the interaction with others and the social creation of meaning around these students' possibilities of learning. Their possibilities are not related to the students' actual difficulties but to the perceptions and attitudes of those around them.

If, in general, high or low expectations have an impact on students' performance ([Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968](#)), they will also influence children who have learning difficulties. Educational staff tend to have low expectations of such children, which the children internalise, negatively influencing their final academic attainment. Also, these students are frequently segregated and assigned less challenging learning materials and activities. As is true for all students, the interactions that occur when these practices are implemented become part of their generalised other, and are incorporated into

their *me*. Then, the *I* responds, reducing their levels of motivation and performance.

Therefore, as we have seen with the other students, in the construction of the learner identities for these children there is a part that is social, and it can be transformed, as it can be for the rest of them. In this case, the transformative dimension of Mead's conception of the *self* is especially important when educators decide on and implement educational actions aimed at these students. Taking Mead's perspective into account allow educators find ways to reinforce these children's positive identities as learners, and thus ways to avoid adding to the difficulties these students already face.

For these students, including more human resources in the regular classroom is very valuable, as it allows them to participate in the same classroom activity as their peers. When this support is not introduced specifically for those students but is a part of the regular functioning of the class, it does not imply that these students are different from the others.

The advantage of having students work in groups of heterogeneous learning levels and abilities, rather than segregating them, is also evident when these groups include students with disabilities and learning difficulties. Segregated placements transmit low expectations, which lower these students' motivation. As one teacher says, the students «are not stupid; they realise that he is doing something different» from the rest of the class. On the other hand, these students do better in heterogeneous groups, partly because peer interactions are a significant source of help for them. As a teacher explains:

Sometimes I have tried to arrange the tables depending on the group, putting those with more difficulties [together] so that I can put myself right there, but really I see that it does not work better like that. On the contrary, when they are mixed up sometimes more than one of them will give a classmate a hand. They don't do it for them, because sometimes I have said to them, when they've finished: «Explain how he or she has to do it, but don't do it yourself, you just have to explain to them how to do it.» Therefore the fact that this relationship exists between the child who has already done it and the other one who he or she explains it to, is perhaps sometimes more productive than if I explain it to them, because if they think that I am always on top of them, then there is also a bit of a barrier.

In this way, students with learning difficulties and disabilities become incorporated into the classroom activity and meanwhile receive the support they need to do their task. No differences are established between them and the others, so no one creates different images about them as learners. This is especially important for these students, who may have had many experiences that differentiated them from the others, including different classroom prac-

tices, special classes, special teachers, and special activities and content to work on. All these elements separate them from the other students, labelling them and shaping an identity for them as special learners, that is, «less capable learners». As this teacher explains:

The fact that the special education teacher comes into the classroom and they are not taken out: I think that is very positive... (...) just as much for them, no? Because if not, they get labelled [and people say] «ah, here comes the stupid one with the [teacher] from special [education]», no? Because that's the way it is.

Both teachers and peers transmit images about learning and learners that these students internalise. But when the learning context and interactions are transformed, these images are also transformed, for them and for their classmates. The educational actions that result from this transformation allow them more possibilities for learning. Then, these children's *me* start to incorporate positive feedback because of what they can do and the fact that others are aware of it. The special education teacher gave an example of this:

In the case of that girl it was very strange because I also did a lot of support hours with her outside the classroom (...) so then everything to do with learning communities came up (...). In the case of that girl, instead of taking her out they do interactive groups in that session, we thought that I could go in with her, into the class. And of course, it was a change... a complete change. Because she saw that she could do things and also the others saw that she could do them. No, (...) she was not the silly one, no one could then say that «she doesn't know how to do anything», you know?.

## DISCUSSION

If students are to perform well, the key is dialogue and interaction with different educational agents in the context of successful educational actions. Mead's conceptions of the dialogic *self*, the *me*, and the *I* have practical didactic implications for the ways students create their identities as learners. By basing educational practice on Mead's perspective of a dialogic *self*, we can not only understand how learners' identities are created and how these identities impact their achievement, but can also see ways to transform them, by transforming the learning environment and the practices children are involved in.

Schools that are having great success in improving their students' academic performance are in fact implementing practices that transform the learning context and interactions. Three examples of these transformations

are high expectations of all students, coordination of actions between the home and the school, and increases in the number and diversity of interactions that support all students in learning. These involve interaction and dialogue in the communication through gestures —verbal or non-verbal— between students and others in their learning environment; this process has a positive impact on the perceptions students have of themselves, that is, their identities as learners, and greatly improve their learning progress.

If schools are to ensure that all students learn, they need to consider theoretical contributions like those of Mead. Because his theory allows us to understand the *self* as dynamic and dependent on human action, we can then understand that students' identities as learners are not stable but instead depend on the learning context and on educational practices and interactions. Therefore, this perspective allows for transformative interventions from education: rather than passively assuming that students' difficulties are related to their low expectations and poor identity as learners, educators can create opportunities to promote students' identities as capable learners and thus allow all students to succeed.

## REFERENCES

- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Centre of Research in Theories and Practices that Overcome Inequalities (CREA). (2008a). *Case studies of effective educational practices in Europe. Primary education: Spain*. INCLUD-ED project. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education, 2006-2011. 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. Citizens and governance in a knowledge-based society. CIT4-CT-2006-028603. Brussels: Directorate-General for Research, European Commission.
- Centre of Research in Theories and Practices that Overcome Inequalities (CREA). (2008b). *Case studies of effective educational practices in Europe. Special education: Spain*. INCLUD-ED project. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education, 2006-2011. 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. Citizens and governance in a knowledge-based society. CIT4-CT-2006-028603. Brussels: Directorate-General for Research, European Commission.
- Centre of Research in Theories and Practices that Overcome Inequalities (CREA). (2009). *Working papers: Case studies of local projects in Europe. 3rd round: Spain*. INCLUD-ED project. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education, 2006-2011. 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. Citizens and governance in a knowledge-based society. CIT4-CT-2006-028603. Brussels: Directorate-General for Research, European Commission.
- Díez-Palomar, J., & Flecha, R. (2010). Comunidades de aprendizaje: Un proyecto de transformación social y educativa [Learning communities: A project for social and educational transformation]. *Revista Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado*, 67(24,1), 19-30.

- Flecha, R. (2009). Cambio, inclusión y calidad en las comunidades de aprendizaje [Change, inclusion and quality in learning communities]. *Cultura & Educación*, 21(2), 157-169.
- INCLUD-ED Project. (2006-2011). *Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education* (6th Framework Programme. Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-based Society. CIT4-CT-2006-028603.) Brussels: Directorate-General for Research, European Commission.
- INCLUD-ED Consortium. (2009). *Working papers: Case studies of local projects in Europe (3rd Round)*. INCLUD-ED Project. Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education, 2006-2011. 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-based Society. CIT4-CT-2006-028603. Brussels: Directorate-General for Research, European Commission.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**Dr. Suzanne Gatt** is a university lecturer in Primary Science and Environmental Education at the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. She is particularly interested in science education and learning approaches such as constructivism. With INCLUD-ED she is currently working on community involvement and success in schools. She is co-editor of *Constructivist Teaching in Primary School: Examples in Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, Design and Technology and ICT* (Malta: Agenda Publishers, 2003).

**Dr. Ignasi Puigdemívol** is chair professor of the University School at the Department of Didactics and Educational Organisation at the University of Barcelona. His research focuses on pedagogical methods, educational advising and orientation, and special education. He is the author of *La educación especial en la escuela integrada. Una perspectiva desde la diversidad* (Barcelona, Graó, 1997; 6<sup>th</sup> edition revised and extended, 2005) and co-author of *Comunidades de Aprendizaje: Transformar la educación* (Barcelona, Graó, 2003).

**Dr. Silvia Molina** is a professor in the Department of Pedagogy at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili. She is currently participating in the study «Formas de agrupación del alumnado y su relación con el éxito escolar: "Mixture", "Streaming" e Inclusión» (Spanish Plan of R+D, 2009-2011), derived from the INCLUD-ED Project. She is the co-author of Educational inclusion and critical pedagogy, *Teoría de la Educación: Educación y Cultura en la Sociedad de la Información*, Vol 10, No 3 (2009).

Fecha de recepción: 17-06-10

Fecha de revisión: 20-08-10

Fecha de aceptación: 13-09-10