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The learning migration nexus: towards a conceptual understanding

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Abstract

Learning and identity formation are inescapable facets of the upheavals accompanying migration; movement across social space inevitably involves reflection, questioning and the need to learn new ways of being and new identities. Although migration is characterised by complexity and diversity, this paper suggests that we can identify key learning perspectives which illuminate the nexus between learning and migration. It argues for an approach which grounds learning in an understanding of socio-cultural space, and highlights the significance of policy discourses surrounding migration and integration. Within the conceptual framework suggested, the nature of learning is seen as multifaceted, and as having the potential to have both positive and negative outcomes for migrants.

Keywords: migration; learning; identity; transformative learning

Introduction

Migration is driven by many complex factors: a better life, the belief of greater opportunities to study or work, to join family and friends. Many however, are forced to move — refugees fleeing persecution, conflict or natural disasters or victims of trafficking. The complex mix of reasons which might cause migration, are coupled with an understanding that migrants are social beings, whose migratory experiences are shaped and conditioned by ethnicity, race, gender, social class and position in the life cycle. These social differences cross cut and interact effecting migratory strategies, integration outcomes, life chances and opportunities in the country of destination.

This paper argues that learning and development are inescapable facets of the upheavals which accompany the migration process, but given such complexity and diversity, asks how we can begin to understand the processes of learning and identity formation as migrants seek to adjust and establish themselves in a new context? What are the conceptual and theoretical frameworks and understandings which can help to make sense of migrant experiences and outcomes? The first part of this paper sets the scene by outlining the key trends in contemporary migration in Europe. I will then draw upon some of the learning perspectives which might shed light on how we can understand migration through the lens of learning. I will suggest that learning has to be

contextualised: that we cannot understand migration and learning without reference to movement across social space, and an understanding of the social and cultural space in which the migrant ends their journey.

Contemporary migration in Europe

Castles and Miller (2003) identify five general trends in contemporary migration which are worth briefly paraphrasing. *Globalisation*: a tendency for more countries to be affected by migration and a broader spectrum of economic, social and cultural background of migrants. The *acceleration* of migration: the quantitative growth in population movements in all major regions; the *differentiation* of migration: countries are experiencing a range of types of migration at once, e.g. labour migration, family reunification and refugees. The *feminisation* of migration: women play a significant role in all regions and in most, but not all, types of migration. Finally, the growing *politicisation* of migration: national and international security policies and domestic politics are increasingly affected by international migration.

These processes and the dramatic increase in migration are evidenced by rapid and highly visible social and cultural change. Unlike the migration flows of most of the last century, one of the defining features of contemporary migration is that the overwhelming majority of those who move come from countries of greater social, cultural and often racial "distances" from the countries they seek to enter (Papademetriou, 2007). In 2005/06, almost 11% of the population in the OECD was foreign-born. Latin American and African migrant populations increased by more than 30% between 2000 and 2005/06, only slightly more than that of Asian migrants (27%) (Widmaier & Dumont, 2011). Within these figures there is considerable diversity in terms of the reasons for migration and the educational backgrounds of those migrating. OECD (2012) research¹ found that in 15 European countries for which data was available, over half of migration is for family related reasons: 27% for family formation or reunification and 25% entered under the age of 15. Over a quarter of immigrants entered for professional reasons; only 6% stated they had entered for humanitarian reasons, 5% as students and 8% for other reasons. Furthermore, there were important differences across countries: family related migration is particularly significant in France, the Netherlands and Norway. Conversely, between 40% and 50% of immigrants in Greece, Italy, Ireland and Spain had migrated for work. Approximately 18% of immigrants settled in Sweden had entered for humanitarian reasons. Inevitably, the experience of migration and the integration outcomes for immigrants will vary significantly depending on the category of entry, country of settlement, country of origin and educational attainment. One key trend which was widespread was the over qualification of migrants: the report found that on average, 30% of immigrants holding a university degree were working in intermediate or low-skilled jobs, highly-educated migrants tended to have lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates than their native-born counterparts (OECD, 2012).

This diversity makes it impossible to talk of a single migrant experience or to make broad generalisations about the settlement outcomes for migrants. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some broad commonalities in experience and factors which will impact on the experience. The first of these is that migration involves movement across social space. This evokes intense moments of learning across all domains of life: work, home, leisure, community and family. The degree of cultural distance between the country of origin and the country of destination will influence the extent and depth of

learning evoked, and also the degree to which the resources – linguistic and cultural which the migrant brings can be utilised. Related to this, migrants are confronted with the need to reshape their lives and, to varying degrees, build and modify their identities. Previous aspects of identity associated with social positions such as work, family roles, community and cultural activities will be transformed. The dominant stories individuals told about themselves might no longer cohere and they are confronted with a need to story their lives differently. Finally, the learning and identity practices which are enabled or denied are contingent on the specific social contexts in which the individual is moving, both the social spaces they have moved from and the social spaces in the country they have moved to. Social context is conceptualised in terms of the broader social and political context, and the social spaces connected with work, education, family and so on. It is these three overlapping and intersecting elements: learning, identity and social space which I wish to explore here.

Conceptualising migration from a learning perspective

The idea that the individual's experience is the foundation and most important resource for learning still underlies much of the discourse and assumptions of Western adult education. This emphasis assumes that adults come to learning situations with experience and that this is at the centre of knowledge production and meaning-making. The centrality of the individual's experience is the defining feature of liberal humanist understandings of learning. The learner in this paradigm has a central role as a meaning maker: interpreting and building frames of reference and constructing knowledge. What has changed over the last 15 years or so is recognition that the process of meaning making occurs across all areas of our daily lives and at all stages in our lives, and encompasses learning in both formal and informal contexts (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). Learning becomes part of our whole life experience and for adults the social milieu, and their engagement with it, is a key determinant of what is learned and how it is learned.

Alongside a widening of the concept of learning has been a deepening of the concept to recognise its embodied and affective significance (e.g. Beckett & Hager, 2002; Hodkinson, Ford, Hawthorn & Hodkinson, 2007). Learning is not solely, or even predominantly, about acquisition of skills and knowledge but is a more holistic process: body, mind and emotions are intrinsic to the construction and transformation of life experiences which then become integrated into the individual's biography. It is through the integration of learning that the self is constructed and identity is transformed. The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) usefully highlights the informal learning and meaning making which occurs in social encounters and as part of every day practices in any location. It also encapsulates the idea of change through learning, in the centripetal movement in a community of practice from newcomer or novice, to full membership and competence. Learning is an essential part of being human and an essential way in which identity is constructed and changed over the life course. Hodkinson et al. (2007, p. 33) propose a similar view of learning as being about the construction of the self '[p]eople become through learning, and learn through becoming'. By conceptualising learning as part of being, and also part of the ongoing construction of the person, they argue that learning, identity and agency are interwoven in people's lives such that there is no clear separation between them. A similar understanding is suggested by Alheit and Dausien's concept of biographical learning: learning is interactive and socially

[152] Linda Morrice

structured, but it also follows its own "logic" generated by the specific, biographically layered structure of experience (Alheit & Dausien, 2002).

Jarvis (2009, p. 1) captures the breadth and depth of learning in his formulation that learning is:

The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body ... and mind ... - experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through a combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

Learning is an on-going project and consequently identities are permanently shifting, continually being formed and reformed in different contexts; crucially this occurs within the social, political and public discourses in which the individual is located. As the cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes:

[...] identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions (Hall, 2000, p. 17).

Recognising the significance of learning and identity formation through daily social encounters and practices is important to understanding migration from a learning perspective. The process of migration disrupts inherited frames of meaning and the accumulated biographical repertoire of knowledge and understanding; migrants are required to learn new behaviours, quite probably a new language, understand new rules and to adapt to new values and another type of social space. It is difficult to imagine any other life event in which learning becomes so wholly part of daily life experience, with few, if any, aspects of life left untouched by the need to learn. For migrants learning is an inevitable part of life.

The notion that learning occurs when individuals are faced with situations which are new and unfamiliar, or where they are confronted with what they don't know and perhaps need to know, is influential in adult education. Jarvis (2006) suggests that the disjuncture between biography and experience is at the start of all learning processes. He describes episodes where 'our biographical repertoire is no longer sufficient to cope automatically with our situation, so that our unthinking harmony with our world is disturbed and we feel unease' (Jarvis, 2006, p. 16). He goes on to suggest that the need to try and re-establish harmony 'may be amongst the most important motivating factors for most individuals to learn (Jarvis, 2006, p. 77).

Mezirow's work on transformative learning (1990; 2000) also focuses on situations of disjuncture in individual's lives. He defines transformative learning as:

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (...) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

A central proposition is that when an individual's 'frame of reference' or 'meaning perspective' is discordant with their experience, a 'disorientating dilemma occurs', individuals begin to critically reflect on and question the validity of their inherited meaning perspective, and transformation of perspective can occur. This involves structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships. Indeed Mezirow

suggests that the most significant learning 'involves critical premise reflection of premises about oneself' (Mezirow, 1994, p. 224). The learning processes involve different degrees of comprehension and 'mindfulness'; they may be the result of deliberate enquiry, incidental or 'mindlessly assimilative'. Taylor (1994) has drawn on Mezirow's theory to understand the development of intercultural competence among migrants. From disorientating dilemma or 'culture shock' he suggests that Mezirow's (1991) ten stages of perspective transformation are analogous to the movement from lower to higher levels of cultural competency.

Some key points emerge from these conceptualisations of learning which are particularly significant for understanding migration. The first is the importance of biography and attention to the totality of an individual's life. At the core of these conceptualisations of learning is individual experience - what learners bring to the learning situation, their inheritance from the past. Also implicit in these conceptions of learning is that an individual's learning biography is sequential, and that no one point can be understood without looking at what preceded it. It is not only the cultural and social background which is woven into the lives and identity of migrants, and their motivations and hopes for migrating which is significant, but also the different roles and identities taken up in their pre-migration lives. An understanding of these pre-migration identities and experiences helps us to understand migrants as whole beings with aspirations, expectations and dreams. It enables us to transcend the identities imposed by the immigration system for instrumental purposes: refugee, asylum seeker, undocumented, family reunion, student or labour migrant. In the process of categorising and defining much is assumed, and other existing and potential identities are negated. In order to understand how individual migrants might seek to reconstruct their identity, and the strategies they might employ, it is necessary to go beyond the imposed identity categories and consider their individual life history and how the social and cultural experiences which shaped their lives prior to migration now impinge and influence their experiences as migrants.

Implicit in these conceptualisations of learning is that individuals will emerge as more confident, competent individuals, that learning brings about positive outcomes and benefits for the learner. Transformations are generally assumed to be positive and to build on previous learning and experience in a linear and incremental way. There is little research or understanding of the negative outcomes and disbenefits of learning (Morrice, 2011; 2013), or what Illeris (2013) has referred to as "regressive transformative learning". As I will go on to suggest, in the case of migrants, the idea that learning may not necessarily be linear or positive needs to be considered.

We have seen how learning and identity are inextricably linked in these formulations, and have suggested that identity practices and formation occurs within specific social contexts. It is the wider policy, social and power discourses which can shape and constrain identities, privileging some while marginalising others. Whether identities can be enacted is highly contingent on the power-laden spaces in and through which our experiences are lived, and whether such identities are recognised or accepted in particular spaces. The systematic operation of power defines 'who can claim a particular identity, where, and who cannot, who is in place and who is out of place' (Valentine & Sporton, 2009, p. 748). To develop these points further necessitates an understanding of social context in which learning and personal transformation processes occur.

Situating learning in the social world

The work of Bourdieu (1977; 1998; 1999) provides some useful tools for thinking about learning, identity and social spaces. In his framework, the concepts of social capital (social contacts and networks) and cultural capital (education, cultural knowledge) are fungible resources which can be drawn upon to bring advantage to the holder. Crucially, in order to bring benefits to those who possess them, they have to be recognised as legitimate in the field or social space in question. Only then can these resources be converted into symbolic capital and bring advantage. Bourdieu's notions of field and capital work in tandem with 'habitus', a concept which describes the embodied dispositions, values and ways of thinking which derive from our upbringing. Habitus is described as permeable and as continually being restructured by the individual's engagement with the social world. It is 'an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal!' (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 133). Bourdieu offers us a view of the social world that is above all relational. We can only make sense of social realities in terms of the relative ownership of various forms of capital in the field, the relative positions actors occupy within social fields and also by the structural relations between fields. This offers a particularly salient framework in which to locate migration and the attendant learning and identity processes.

Individuals are born into a particular habitus and will inherit ways of thinking, attitudes and values; they will acquire the cultural and social capital necessary and appropriate to move and exist within their particular social milieu. All the time an individual exists within a social world of which they are a product, they do not feel or notice the tacit rules, norms and traditions which govern activity. Instead, life is experienced in a taken for granted or unthinking way. The social and cultural capital accumulated is generally recognised as legitimate and has an exchange value; therefore individuals can draw upon their cultural capital in order to access appropriate education and employment opportunities. Their social capital can be drawn upon to navigate their way around systems and to access societal resources. However, with movement across social space, one of the commonalities shared by all migrants, this can change dramatically. The capitals which migrants have accumulated might not be recognised as legitimate and may have little or no exchange value in the new field.

The habitus which prior to migration had operated at a largely unconscious level encounters a new social space of which it is not a product. At this point it becomes: 'a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities' (Bourdieu, 199, p. 511). These are moments of dislocation and discontinuity with the past, which generate periods of intense reflection and learning. This notion of a habitus divided against itself clearly resonate with Mezirow's "disorientating dilemma" and the need to develop a "superior perspective", Jarvis's disjuncture between biography and experience and the "need to re-establish harmony", and also Alheit and Dausien's understanding of a "biographical stock of knowledge" which remains implicit and tacit 'until we find ourselves stumbling, or at a crossroads' (Alheit & Dausien 2002, p. 15). But how this occurs, what learning might take place and what identities might be enacted will be dependent on the new social space or field in which migrants are located, and most especially, the policies, social and political discourses concerned with immigration, integration and lifelong learning. How these discourses construct migrants, and the extent to which

there are systems and mechanisms in place for the recognition and conversion of migrants' cultural capital will have a profound effect on learning and identity.

The formal learning which migrants can engage in and the employment opportunities available to them will, to a large part, depend on whether there are processes in place to validate and recognise academic, vocational and professional qualifications and competencies which they bring with them. In order for migrants to be able to enter appropriate learning programmes, or to work in employment corresponding with their qualifications, the recognition system has to be clear and easily accessible. That is, there needs to be mechanisms in place for the recognition and conversion of capital into symbolic forms in order for it to have exchange value. Although the methods and systems for recognising foreign qualifications vary across European countries, research funded by the European Commission found that responsibility for assessing and recognising qualifications was fragmented in most European Union [EU] countries, and that this was likely to discourage migrants from seeking to get their qualifications recognised. Furthermore, there was a lack of awareness amongst employers and migrants of the functioning and outcomes of recognition processes (Schuster, Desiderio & Urso 2013). The report concluded that policies hampered migrants' ability to find their way around systems and utilize their existing capital. The report stated that '[i]n most EU Member States, foreign qualifications, especially if earned in third countries, are largely discounted in the labour market. The same applies to work experience abroad' (Schuster, Desiderio & Urso 2013, p. 18). Research has also indicated how lack of relevant social capital contributes to the underemployment and deskilling of migrants (Morrice, 2007; Cardu, 2007). In her study of female migrants, Cardu lists a number of reasons including lack of knowledge of the labour market (where to go, how to make skills known, how to access internships), and lack of networks to help them familiarise themselves with the work culture, such as how to behave during a job interview (Cardu, 2007).

Unable to convert existing cultural capital, and as relative newcomers possessing limited relevant social capital to navigate the unfamiliar systems, we can see how one of the key trends across all categories of migrant and all European countries is that migrants are consistently reported as experiencing higher unemployment rates, as being underemployed or overqualified for the jobs they are doing. For example, according to Eurostat the employment rate among third country nationals was 10% lower than that of the total population. When employed, migrants were much more likely to be employed in jobs where skill requirements are lower than their educational attainment and/or their professional qualifications (Eurostat, 2011). Research also found that migrants face 'severe discrimination' in the labour market; they are less likely to be hired, even where their qualifications are similar to non-migrants (Huddleston, Niessen & Dag Tjaden, 2013, p.6). Migrants not only experience higher levels of unemployment, but they have a lower level of income and particularly those from outside of the EU have a significantly increased risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2011). Deskilling particularly affects migrant women who, according to the International Organisation for Migration [IOM] face 'double disadvantage', with those from visible minorities being 'triply disadvantaged' (IOM, 2012 p. 165-166). The report found that migrant women from third countries (i.e. not from an EU member state) were at greater risk of unemployment than third country migrant men, EU migrants and native born women. Highly educated migrant women born outside of the EU are twice as likely to be employed in low skilled jobs as EU born and native born women with the same level of education (IOM, 2012).

In education, migrant students are less likely to be referred to higher track education even when their grades are similar to non-migrants, and foreign trained migrants' qualifications are often not recognised (Huddleston, Niessen & Dag Tjaden, 2013). Brine (2006) argues that European policies around lifelong learning are underpinned by a structural hierarchy of learners. She suggests that different learners are constructed within two discernible discourses: a discourse of the knowledge economy, which consistently relates to higher level graduate learners; and a discourse of the knowledge society, linked to discourses of social cohesion and political stability, which is concerned with learners who have low skills or who are unemployed. The latter are the gendered, classed and "raced" learners needing basic and social skills training. Education and training initiatives for this latter group are more concerned with ensuring social and political stability than enabling them to develop high level skills for the knowledge economy. Migrants, regardless of the level of skills and qualifications, appear to be positioned in the discourse of the knowledge society with fewer opportunities than non-migrants to participate in the knowledge economy.

This focus on stability and cohesion is reflected in integration policies and practices across Europe which have increasingly been concerned with ensuring that migrants adopt the language and cultural values of the host country, and this is seen in the increasing use of compulsory pre- and post-entry integration measures. In his review of integration policies in nine European countries Perchinig (2012) suggests that there has been a shift in integration policy across Europe. Up until the 1990's integration was based on a rights-based framework, focusing on legal equality, security of residence and social and political participation. In this framework, the state was the main actor responsible for removing barriers and ensuring appropriate support was in place for migrants to have equal access to education, the labour market and society more generally. In the 1990's integration policies were re-framed around a duty based concept which shifted responsibility to the individual migrant. Compulsory measures aimed at the individual migrant: language classes and testing, classes in civic education and testing about the history and political system of the country, became a core part on integration policies in many countries across Europe. The Netherlands were the first with the introduction of the 'inburgeringsbeleid', in 2003 Austria introduced an 'Integration Agreement', followed by the 'Contrat d'accueil et de l'integration' in France. In the UK a 'Life in the UK' test was introduced in 2004 with many other countries following suit. Increasingly countries have also adopted pre-entry language conditions for family re-unification, and in Austria and the UK for admission as a qualified worker.

Integration has become an identity issue with migrants having to prove their willingness to integrate by attending classes and passing tests. In this framework migrants are expected to demonstrate a commitment to the values and cultural traits of the host country (Perchinig, 2012). This shift points to the growing politicisation of migration and concerns about national identity across Europe. These concerns have been exacerbated by the economic crisis which has affected the perception of migrants' role in Europe: a number of countries have tightened their immigration policies, populist parties across Europe have capitalized on the idea that immigration is fuelling unemployment for native-born workers, threatening national identity and community cohesion. High profile debates about integration and a questioning of multi-culturalism have been taking place across Europe (Collett, 2011).

It could be argued that these policy initiatives are underpinned by an agenda of social and moral regulation; that policy is constructing migrants as morally problematic, in need of civic education in order to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs to

become good or successful European citizens. This deficit construction sees migrants as a problem to be contained and managed, rather than an asset or resource to be developed. At the same time, migrants are positioned in policy and practice in a way which affords few opportunities to convert and trade up the capitals they possessed into symbolic capital, and educational and employment reward. Migrants learn that their linguistic skills, education, employment qualifications, skills and experience are 'nonresources' and cannot be converted into other resources or symbolic power to bring advantage in the labour or education market. Research into the psychosocial impact of deskilling found that underemployed women 'had feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, confusion and paralysis, exhaustion, stress, anxiety, depression, unhappiness, tension, frustration, worry, isolation and a feeling of not belonging, and shame' (IOM, 2012, p. 166).

In Bourdieu's framework (1977; 1998) policy and social discourses can be thought of as schemes of perception and classification which symbolically construct groups and ensure that relations of subordination and domination are reproduced. Policy and the language it uses impose taxonomies, identities and institutes entitlements and rights. It defines what kind of migrant subject it is possible to be, and in the case of education and employment what opportunities are available.

Discussion and conclusion

In attempting to develop a framework for understanding the learning-migration nexus I have suggested that learning is usefully conceptualised in its widest sense to encapsulate learning through and from everyday social practices and interactions. I've drawn attention to learning as involving more than acquisition of skills and knowledge – the focus of formal learning programmes embedded in integration strategies targeting migrants. More useful are conceptions of learning which recognise that learning has to do with change of the whole person, their identity and self perception, and that this inevitably involves a deep affective dimension. For migrants, the disjuncture between past and present, the old social space and new, involves rethinking the self, identity and possibilities of being, across all domains of life.

How this occurs will depend in part on a number of variables such as the cultural distance between the old and new spaces, and the nature of ongoing family and other connections with the space they have come from; the motivation for migration and the degree of choice, and consequently the scope for planning and agency. How migrants are classified and categorised in immigration policy will also significantly determine their rights and entitlements to education and employment; asylum seekers, for example, are denied opportunities to work and to participate in education in many countries. There are also very significant differences in the outcomes depending on entry status; for example women entering through family reunification, asylum or student routes fare worse than those entering as labour migrants (IOM, 2012). Any conceptual framework also has to recognise migrants as social beings with particular attributes: gender, social class, ethnicity, religion, education, age and stage in the life cycle, all of which will affect the way that migration is experienced and managed. Biographical or life course approaches offer a holistic approach to understanding migrants as individuals who have moved across space, who have pasts, presents and futures. It enables us to look beyond the taxonomies imposed by policy, opening up scope for understanding migrants as individuals with multiple identities some of which may be enabled in the new social space, while others might be denied or marginalised in the new social space. These pre-migration characteristics and identities will influence and shape the learning processes and identity construction in a new context.

The brief sketch of some of the most relevant policy indicates the significance of public and policy discourses, and the social space in which they are embedded, to understanding the learning experiences and identity processes of migrants. Migrants are placed into symbolic structures of inequality, determining what economic and educational opportunities are available to them and limiting their access to different forms of capital. Integration policies across Europe tend to construct migrants as in deficit, requiring the addition of citizenship knowledge and language skills; there are few opportunities and mechanisms in place to support migrants to demonstrate or build upon existing cultural capital. Coupled with these policy discourses are the increasingly negative perceptions of migrants in public and social discourses. In this context, learning for migrants may not always be positive, it can also involve learning that they cannot use their social and cultural capital to establish themselves and that previously held high status identities cannot be taken up. This suggests that there is unpredictability around migration and learning: learning is multi-faceted and can have both positive and negative outcomes for the migrant. Positive outcomes may include developing cultural and linguistic competencies or personal change towards something better. But there is also the possibility of negative outcomes: the impact on subjectivities of prejudiced social discourses, and the way education and employment are circumscribed and scripted by policy which shapes and constrains the identities that are possible. Migrants are not always able to build on previous learning, and learning will not necessarily or always lead to improvement or be rewarding. There may be significant gaps between the imagined identities and the realised identities, so that migrants may well have to adjust their sense of who they are, and what they can be in the world.

Endnote

¹ The report draws on surveys conducted by the OECD over a five year period, and on national reports compiled by OECD countries.

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