

Spotlight on Social Learning

September 2020: Identity Month

This year at Sistema Toronto we begin with a new topic in our Social Curriculum: **Identity**. This seemingly simple concept can be a slippery one. On one hand, identity refers to our sense of self, to how we see and understand ourselves from the inside. On the other hand, identity is defined by our interactions with the external world, and the different ways we identify with or are identified by others. In *Developing Positive Identities: Diversity and Young Children* (2008, p. 6), Brooker and Woodhead refer to these as *personal* and *social* identity:

Personal Identity refers to children's subjective feelings about their distinctiveness from others, their sense of uniqueness, of individuality. Social Identity refers, on the other hand, to the ways in which they are (or would like to be) the same as others, typically through identification with family and/or peer culture.

Learning to recognize, understand, and grapple with the competing pressures brought to bear by our internal and external identities is an important part of growing up and developing a healthy self-concept.

At Sistema we are also interested in our students' musical identities. From their first day in the program, our students walk in the door with a wealth of musical experience and knowledge, music from their friends, families, and neighbourhoods, from television, radio, video games, YouTube, in short their own unique musical culture. As they move through our program and making music becomes a part of their daily life, their sense of having a musical identity becomes stronger and more sophisticated.

Our youngest students are still in the early stages of exploring their internal identity. According to Erikson's eight-stage theory of psychosocial development¹ they are at the fourth stage, Industry vs. Inferiority. When asked about their identity they often answer in terms of their activities and interests, or their tastes and preferences. Our older students are much more concerned with their external identity. Erikson's theory places them at the fifth stage, Identity vs. Role Confusion. When asked about their identity they often answer in terms of the roles they are exploring in their lives, as students, family members, and increasingly aware citizens.



The Social Curriculum activities we developed for Identity month prompt our students to explore, define, and describe their developing identities, and each activity provides a different lens through which our teachers can help guide them to deeper and more meaningful inquiry into their personal, social, and musical identities. Since we are currently operating all of our classes online using Zoom, the

activities were designed to work easily in a digital format, using screen share and annotation functions where possible to make them more interactive. The activities all include a set of discussion questions for the teacher to use to guide the class in a reflective conversation after it is done.

Emoji Logo was designed to encourage our students to reflect on their personal identity. In this activity students are invited to create a personal statement using exactly three emoji, a sort of personal motto or coat of arms, and send it to the teacher in the Zoom chat. Then the teacher shares the examples with the class, and asks them to guess who is represented by each emoji logo.



Restricting the students to only three emoji pushes them to engage critically with their choices, challenging them to identify which aspects of their identity are most important to them and most likely to help their classmates identify their motto. Finally, the teachers are invited to paste the completed emoji mottos onto a mock-up of a t-shirt, phone, sneaker, hat, or shield, for the students to see their personal brand in action.

Inside Out, Outside In prompts our students to reflect on their social identity, and how it contrasts with their personal identity. In the first slide, students are invited to describe how they see themselves, and who they are on the inside. In the second slide, they are invited to describe how they are seen by others.





In the ensuing discussion, the class is invited to reflect on the differences between these descriptions. Some of these differences arise naturally out of the limits of human perception, communication and language. Others differences are caused by biases, stereotypes, and assumptions about race, class, gender, body shape, or other sources of implicit or explicit discrimination.

Another new activity we started this month, **My Music**, is part of a new series of listening activities designed to help our students explore and express their musical identities. Each class one of our students will be invited to share a piece of music that is important to them, and answer questions from their classmates and teachers about it. At the beginning of every month, the teachers and students will be provided with new questions, so their discussions can get increasingly detailed as their knowledge and listening experience grows.

Each of these activities creates a different way in to a reflective conversation with the class about their identities, and supporting their evolving understanding of who they are. By inviting our students to share things about their personal identity, we help them to feel recognized and valued. By discussing their social identities, and we aim to equip them better to negotiate the tensions that arise as they navigate their relationships and life in society. By building our music theory, analysis, and history lessons around our students own musical tastes and preferences, we hope not only to foster deeper engagement with the material, but to empower our students as listeners and musicians with their own thoughts and ideas about music. Recognizing and celebrating our students in these ways can help make them more comfortable exploring their personal, social, and musical identities, and more confident expressing them both in and outside of the classroom.

i McLeod, S. A. (2008). Erik Erikson | Psychosocial Stages - Simply Psychology. Retrieved from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>