Different ‘hefts’, different expectations

Humans tend to be social beings: gathering in groups for mutual support, safety and stimulation. These groups have a propensity to be formed through common interest, need or desire and are created in a socially organic manner. The philosopher Julian Baggini discusses such groups of people as ‘hefts’: social groups that are formed through shared ways of being. The term ‘heft’ comes from the Cumbrian farming practice whereby sheep are not fenced in but learn through the habits of older sheep not to leave their territory:

A heft is the unfenced area sheep learn to keep themselves within. This was originally taught to them by shepherds, but as time goes by, they pass it on to each other and need no shepherding. Sheep who learn this are called hefted, and in much the same way, so are people. Their territorial boundaries are more complicated and flexible, but they too rarely stray beyond them, without a shepherd, even though there are no fences keeping them in. Individualism is a great myth. All that has really happened is that we have dispensed with the sheepdogs and have become hefted.

Baggini (2008:150)

Baggini discusses hefts in relation to adults’ socio-cultural identity but nowhere is the hefting of humans more obvious than in adolescence. Primary age children fall in and out of friendship easily and don’t seem to crave the need for a group identity in the way that we see in the secondary school. Something happens in adolescence and the first obvious signs of hefting appear. Perhaps this is something hormonal; perhaps it is something intrinsically human; perhaps this is driven by suddenly finding yourself in the space between childhood and adulthood – whatever the reason, adolescents start to form distinct groups. Some of these adolescent hefts have names like emos, skaters, skinheads, ganstas, rastas, rebels, punks, posers, metalheads, militants, techies, wannabes, hippies, hoodies, goody-goodies, goths and geeks, but many are nameless collections of adolescents who share something less easily categorised. Friendship groups, gangs, cliques and crews are not always so easy to classify and just labelling adolescents by one characteristic is too simple as many teens are indefinable in that they cannot themselves tell you what they ‘are’. These hefts are not stable and, like the pastures of the Cumbrian Fells, the edges of the hefts are broad and ill-defined. Somehow everyone just knows what is what. No heft has a group meeting to establish the group rules. The codes of a specific heft are shared through transmitted patterns of behaviours (memes) where concepts are passed from person to person and replicated at a conscious and unconscious level. Codes such as clothing, gesture and language are developed through a fluid social dynamic and expectations of what it is to be a member are shared through behaviour, ritual and expression. However, although group names, group rules and group boundaries are hard to define, there is some irony in that it is always clear when you are not a member of a particular heft.

**Hefted Adolescents**

Hefts provide adolescents with a social context that offers safety, codes of being and a place to be a teenager. Clothing and ways of wearing clothes form part of the normative code of a heft. If the school does not have a set uniform then adolescents may be fully able to express their group dress identity. This does not mean that the situation is any the less in schools with clear uniform codes. Where a school has a specific uniform code we find that the uniform can be worn in a number of ways through variations in tie length; shirts tucked or untucked; boots rather than shoes, and badges pinned to blazers. Then there are fashion choices such as hair styles, jewellery and make-up. While some schools spend enormous amounts of energy on addressing these areas they may find that their time is wasted as the hefted identity is stronger than this and it will show itself in facial gestures, body language and spoken language. Adolescents may be wearing a uniform in accordance with the school policy but a hefted individual often finds a way to show their allegiance and even the way that clothes hang upon their body says something about who they are. School life also offers scope for hefted adolescents to accessorise and various hefts will show themselves through their selection of school bag, pencil case and branded gear. Even the length of a pencil can be an indicator of a certain code of being: I have encountered many adolescents using unfeasibly short pencils and the message seems to be that, in doing so, they are somehow better or cooler than others with pencils of a more functional length.

**Hefted Success**

Different hefts might even have different definitions of success, set out through social interaction within their group. For some to try hard is a waste of time: geeky or sad. For others to even turn up on time seems to break their hefted code of being. (Willis’ (1977) study of underachieving working class boys in the West Midlands is a perfect example of hefted attitudes and hefted ideas of success.) Hefted success is about group members knowing what is important to them and what it is that their particular social model deems to be worthy.

The first definition of success might be making it into a heft in the first place. Gaining approval from others and being part of something bigger seems to offer a certain cachet and a visual signal that you are now accepted. Whilst many adolescents cannot be accused of fitting in with general adult-created societal norms they may indeed fit in with their hefted peers. Other marks of success might include what an individual might bring to the group – if they are a joker or a leader; if they can offer somewhere for the group to hang out; if they have access to certain equipment or supplies, or if they might increase heft members’ likelihood of encountering adolescents of the opposite sex. Being hefted allows the adolescent to hang around with people who ‘get’ them and individuals might begin to feel part of something that helps them make sense out of the rest of their life. Some hefts will have broad goals and some might embrace nihilistic ambitions – either way the group will have a general idea of what being successful means to them. These goals will cover hefted expectations of ‘fitting in’ and will set hefted targets of what is expected of individuals in and out of school.

Ryan (2000) suggests that there are three ways that adolescents are influenced by their kindred peers: through information exchange; through modelling behaviours, and through reinforcement of norms and values. These interactions influence individual heft members as they instinctively mirror and counterfeit the actions, speech and expectations of other heft members. Expectations of success are developed through interaction and the conduct of the heft is set through the intersection of like-minded individuals and measures of success are implicitly transmitted. The difficulty in education is that success is more prescribed than this and that the basic definition of success is tied to academic attainment and social engagement. Even the five outcomes of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004) aim towards fitting in with a wider societal expectation that may be in conflict with some heft-specific descriptors of success and individuals may have different definitions of what it is to ‘make a positive contribution’.

**Hefted Expectations**

Individual expectations of success (self-efficacy) allow adolescents to judge their likely ability to perform a task. This personal perspective is influenced by a number of situational variables (Schunk, 1991) and one of the most significant variables in strengthening efficacy is provided by socially similar others. Here we find heft members influencing the validity of a fellow heftee’s efficacy beliefs through displays of attitudes and attributes. Bandura (1997) reports that the impact of others on ‘beliefs of personal efficacy is strongly influenced by perceived similarity to the models. The greater the assumed similarity the more persuasive’ (p.3) and when it comes to self-efficacy, it makes sense for adolescents to compare themselves to others who share their code of being.

Where an individual might feel capable or incapable of meeting the expectations of the curriculum, the modelled behaviours of fellow heft members will affect this expectation. This could lead to two main outcomes: firstly, the individual adolescent might find that their perspective is shared by significant others and is thus validated. Secondly, the individual adolescent might discover that other heft members hold an alternative perspective and they could become influenced by this. An example of this might include a heft member who originally thought that she couldn’t perform a task being convinced that it is possible after all by observing a fellow heft member accomplish the same task. (This example shows a positive outcome of increased efficacy through interaction with a socially significant other but the converse is also just as likely.)

The current curricular measure of success in England is five A\*-C grades at GCSE and, whilst many adolescents will attain this target, for many this is an impossibility. In this regard the curricular definition of success is bound to let some individuals down and if all adolescents were to embrace the National Curriculum’s idea of success then we would have many adolescents essentially agreeing to work hard within a system that will eventually label them as underachieving (which is just a curricular word for ‘failure’). Why would someone agree to join such a system? Surely it is better for such an individual’s self esteem to set targets that are achievable and that are specific to their own interests. Luckily, whilst meeting curricular targets might not be possible, success may still be attainable at a hefted level.

It is not just academic under-achievers who might find it difficult to sign up to the curricular model of success, many talented individuals become disaffected by the curriculum as their passion for a subject is diminished as it grates against a narrow target-driven syllabus. Hefts don’t suffer this restricted consideration of success -within a heft there is a social dynamic and individuals can be part of the process of constructing a model of success and since the social dynamic of any group is always in flux such targets are rarely rigid and often intangible. Unlike the curricular model of success that is imposed upon adolescents and that leads to certain failure for some, peers within a heft can develop a model of likely success for all members of the group.

**Hefted Teachers**

Adolescent are not alone in belonging to specific groups and ‘many of the characteristics of adolescent groups appear similar to those discussed in the social psychological literature on adult groups’ (Gavin & Furman, 1989:827); therefore it is reasonable to suggest that teachers are also members of various hefts. In considering the (possible) conflict between secondary school and hefted adolescents it is worth considering if any of us truly leave our adolescent hefts. Adults carry aspects of their own adolescent heft with them as part of their adult identity and the things that they cared about as youngsters are likely to still matter, to a greater or lesser degree. Time may fade some of their younger ideals and some of the things teachers cared about back then may now seem naive, embarrassing or wrong but some of their early heft-specific notions will remain. A clear example of this comes from music where adults will often carry some of the ‘core’ music of their youth into their adult lives and still identify with the messages contained within. Adults are just grown up punks, skins, rockers, mods etc.

Teachers’ formative hefts had their group ideas of success and had group ideas about the world. These may have been adapted over the years but their impact will still be felt in adulthood. What teacher has not felt the urge to use ‘their’ music, poetry or pin-ups as part of their teaching repertoire? Teachers churn out Dylan (Bob and Thomas) and Che Guevara, and harp on about the significance of JFK, Thatcher and Mandela, not because these things are necessarily fundamental to everyone but because teachers’ formative hefts have helped establish these things to be significant. What teachers might regard as being objectively important (the fall of the Berlin Wall?) may be influenced by teachers’ subjective adolescent hefted ideals.

There is also the clear possibility that those drawn to teaching may have belonged to certain adolescent hefts that embraced the notion of learning. Teachers may have belonged to hefts whose codes included mantras such as ‘trying hard’; ‘having a go’; ‘being good’; ‘doing what you are told’, and ‘fitting in’ and these codes still define much of education today. Of course some teachers may claim to have been rebels when younger: they will have taken drugs; got into trouble with the police, and generally pushed the boundaries. Here we see an interesting twist where the rebel becomes the conformist; however the codes of their rebellious youth will still underpin their adult understanding, it is just that these codes are used in a different way. The rebel has not forgotten what it is to be a rebel - they have merely used the rules of rebellion to help fortify their new perspective.

Teachers will also belong to adult hefts brought about through things such as social class, education, gym membership, postcode and choice of supermarket. Through all this we are likely to find teachers with codes of being that are in conflict with many of the adolescent heft-specific codes they encounter. In any school there will be children who share the teachers’ hefted expectation of success and there will be children whose heft rejects these completely.

**Conclusion**

A school is one of the few places that different hefts (adolescent and adult) come together under one roof but a school does not have a single identity and a secondary school in particular is made up of a collection of hefts. Within a secondary school we see subject-specific hefts where the codes of the PE department might not reflect those of the RE department. These codes are shown through geographic location; models of discipline; classroom display; dress code; ethos, and academic success rate. These departmental identities draw specific adolescent hefts to specific subjects, which only goes to augment the departmental identity. Unlike a primary school which offers age-specific learning the subject-led curriculum of the secondary school helps enable and enhance hefted identities. McKinnon suggests that ‘we are all thrice hefted, intimately immersed in environment, social relations and our own physicality and subjectivity’ (2009:231) and the fragmented nature of the secondary school can only serve to emphasise these personalised situational factors.

In the end we are left with a range of adolescent hefts with a range of expectations of success. These hefts find themselves learning in an environment that is hefted by subjects and these subjects are taught by adults who are influenced by their own past and present hefts. All this takes place within a curriculum that only offers a narrow definition of success. When we consider that all this takes place in a context of hormones, relationships and bodily change, it is a surprise that adolescents, by and large, do as well as they do. But is there more that can be done to support these hefted adolescents?

Clearly, since we are dealing with human beings, there is no simple answer and no magic wand to be waved. Being hefted is not a bad thing. Feeling that you fit in with a group of similar others can be a fantastic feeling. The difficulty arrives when one adolescent heft finds itself in an environment that does not share its ideas, ideals or its expectations of success. Perhaps, in an effort to address how we might support hefted adolescents, we should start by considering what individuals want from education. Instead of focussing on uniformity of outcome, secondary schools could focus on the need for adolescents to feel that their goals are worthy. The hefted nature of a secondary school means that it can offer support for a wide range of interests: curricular and extra-curricular. Some hefts will be drawn to music; some to drama; some will enjoy sport, art, craft or design; some will wish to volunteer in the local community, and some will want to be MCs or DJs. None of these should be seen as being ‘outside’ of education and none of these should be considered any more or less valuable than academic success. Instead of offering a narrow definition of curricular success secondary schools are ideally placed to enhance self-efficacy. There is a need for a philosophical change in what is considered successful in education: instead of expectations of success being imposed upon adolescents we might consider a model of education that allows people to feel successful because they have achieved in the areas that are important to them.

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