



Philip becomes the devil in a hoodie

Identities can be socially constructed. This extract suggests how this might have happened to one boy – Philip. Philip is the youngest of three children in a stable, supportive family. His father was long-term unemployed but his mother worked. His teachers described him as ‘always well-turned out, never scruffy or untidy, always well-mannered’. Philip’s brother and sister, seven and two years older respectively, preceded him through school.

Philip’s school was in an area of extreme social disadvantage, with the highest take-up of free school meals in what was one of the poorest local authority areas in the north-west of England. The school served a large overspill housing estate, there was a high level of male unemployment and many single parent families. A significant number of children attending Philip’s school were ‘at risk’. Throughout his school Primary school career, where mixed-aged classes were the norm, Philip’s year group was described by his teachers as ‘not as good’ as the younger learners.

Year 4 was pivotal in the creation of Philip’s identity. In Year 3 his teacher described him as “enjoying his work, being responsive, ‘vey much Mr Middle-of-the-Road’”. Philip, up to this point, although being a low achiever and lacking confidence, was keen to do well. His work was neat, tidy and careful. He did not seem to have many problems with his work. By the end of Year 4, However, his teacher described him as ‘extremely disruptive ... poor ability level ... confrontational ...difficult to handle ... a very tough little boy’. Philip had started to become aggressive to other children, and although he began to control this aggression in Year 5, his attitude to learning deteriorated. “He has a very low opinion of his own ability in terms of education. If you tell him that he has to finish five sentences he just says ‘There’s no way I’m going to be able to do that’ ... He’s a pleasure to have as long as you accept that he isn’t going to do any work for you. If you press him, he just doesn’t do it” (Philip’s Year 5 teacher).

Philip did not improve in Year 6. “Most of the time he’ll sit and do very little ... and when you tackle him about it he begins to sulk and won’t do any more ... depending on what kind of mood he is in, he’ll shut up shop and won’t do a thing” (Philip’s Year 6 teacher)

During Year 6 Philip once again became aggressive, rude and surly culminating in a direct challenge to authority in the swimming baths. When Philip’s teachers tried to get him to see the error of his ways, his response was ‘I’m not bothered, don’t care’. At the end of Key Stage 2 Philip achieved a Level 2 in Maths and ungraded in the SATs tests for English and Science (although he was awarded a Level 2 in both on the basis of the tasks).

It would seem that Philip had enjoyed school up to the end of Year 3. He described Mr Matthews, his Year 3 teacher, as the ‘best teacher in the world’.



However, in Year 4 his teacher put him in the Red Group – those needing learning support and Philip became more and more aware of his own shortcomings – ‘I just think I’m not any good – I always get stuck on some words’. Whereas in Year 3 Philip’s teacher seemed keen to support him, this following quotation from his Year 4 teacher suggest a boy coming to terms with his new identity as a failure: “he likes to be seen as tough ... likes to mix with the tough ones in Year 5 ... He’s a volcano ... can’t cope with the suggestion that he’s in the wrong; tries to avoid it ... he wants his own way ... sulks ... sometimes walks out of class” (Philip’s Year 5 teacher).

In Year 5 Philip was getting involved in fights in the playground and in bullying one younger, high-attaining boy in his class. However, when Philip did ask his teacher for help in understanding a particular task his Year 6 teacher said “there are plenty of others in the class who can’t do it but they’re not sulking”.

What this brief description of Philip’s primary school life might suggest is how his sense of self as a learner was constructed and amplified through his interactions with his teachers. From here Phil would go on to become a bottom set learner in his neighbourhood comprehensive school. His ‘tough’ identity lead him towards associating with older boys at secondary school, on the edge of more and more ‘trouble’ until he became a fully fledged gang member, hanging around the shopping parade, constantly causing nuisance with shoppers and shopkeepers until being moved on by the Police Community Support Officer, and then coming to the attention of the local Constable. Eventually labelled as a Persistent Young Offender, Flip wears his Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) badge with pride and is the scourge of his local neighbourhood. Although it is impossible to say for certain that Year 4 changed Flip’s life, it does seem that the very different approaches that his Year 3 and his Year 4 teachers adopted towards his learning problems did have radical consequences for Flip.

[Adapted from ‘The Devil wears hoodie’ by John Robinson in *Childhood Studies* edited by Derek Kassem (2009) Routledge (in press)]

