

Attendance: Klea Ramaj (Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK), Ida Huttunen (University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland), Andreja Brajša-Žganec (Institute of Social Science, Ivo Pilar; Zagreb, Croatia), Sónia Bernardo Correia (Iscte, Lisbon, Portugal), Magda Nico (Iscte, Lisbon, Portugal), and 8 YAB members aged 14-22 (three from the UK, one from Finland, two from Portugal, and two from Croatia).

Meeting organised and led by: Klea Ramaj

Report written by: Klea Ramaj

WP2 - International Youth Advisory Board (IYAB) – 3rd session

Time: Wednesday, November 20th at 13:00 BST

Location: In person at Abraham Moss Community School in Manchester, and online with non-UK participants

Agenda:

1. A brief introduction of everyone present
2. Recap: GUIDE and YABs
3. A brief overview on Universal Children’s Day
4. The theme of this meeting: ‘The Self’
5. Discussion Points
6. Conclusion: Summary and Q&A

1. Introduction

The International Youth Advisory Board (IYAB) convened for the third time on November 20th 2024, on Universal Children’s Day. Young representatives from all four participating countries – the UK, Portugal, Croatia, and Finland – were able to attend the meeting on this occasion. The meeting centred around the theme of ‘the self’ or the ‘Who am I?’ theme, a topic of discussion that was proposed by young people themselves in the IYAB held in September 2024.

The meeting started with a brief introduction of everyone present, including age, position, and country of residence. It then proceeded with a recap of what the COORDINATE Youth Advisory Boards had achieved up until that moment in time. The participants were then provided with a brief overview on the historical significance behind Universal Children’s Day as well as with a short theoretical discussion on how the concept of ‘the self’ has developed throughout history. Finally, the young people present engaged in four discussion points related to the theme of ‘the self’. This report summarises the key takeaways from the meeting, with a primary focus on the results from the four discussion points related to the theme of ‘the self’.



2. Overview of GUIDE and YABs

Growing Up in Digital Europe (GUIDE) is a pan-European study which aims to understand how changes in children's and young people's lives influence their well-being. It is a longitudinal study, meaning that the same children will be followed for the next 25 years. The study is anticipated to start in 2027 and currently the GUIDE team is working towards establishing a solid foundation for the project's future. The data gathered from this study will not only help academics further scientific research but will also help policy makers working in the field of children's rights and child well-being in order to develop better policies on child well-being across Europe.

The International Youth Advisory Board (IYAB) serves as a high-level consultative body, providing guidance on research concerning children and young people. Its mission is to ensure that GUIDE is child-centric insofar that it incorporates children's and young people's viewpoints from the project design phase. By incorporating a diverse range of perspectives from different countries, the board aims to foster a more nuanced understanding of issues pertaining to researching children and young people. As part of the COORDINATE project, the consultations with the young people have been carried out nationally and internationally.

3. A brief overview on Universal Children's Day

The Universal Children's Day on November 20th was first established in 1954 by the United Nations to promote international awareness and commitment to improve children's wellbeing. This date is particularly significant because it marks the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The day is dedicated to advocating for children's rights and ensuring their voices are heard on issues such as education, health, and protection from violence and discrimination. UNICEF as well as other child-focused organisations and projects, such as GUIDE, play a key role in coordinating activities and campaigns for this day, encouraging everyone from governments to individuals to act in support of children's rights.

4. The theme of 'The Self'

Following an engaging brainstorming process in the IYAB meeting in September 2024, young people proposed three main themes for COORDINATE's last IYAB to be held on Universal Children's Day: 1) Technology, Child Wellbeing, and Parenting; 2) The 'Who Am I?' Theme; 3) The Benefits of Technology. Following several consultations among colleagues working for the COORDINATE project in Manchester, we decided to go forward with the second proposed theme given that discussions on the implications of technology are quite common and had, most importantly, already been addressed in previous discussions in YAB meetings.



The three main issues that emerged from the IYAB meeting in September 2024, pertaining to the theme of ‘the self’ were the following: 1) The importance of promoting child individuation from an early age; 2) The benefits of providing a supportive environment for children to feel they have the space and resources to develop their innate potential; 3) How a better understanding of themselves helps children become more well-functioning individuals in the future, which also benefits society as a whole.

The concept of ‘the self’ has been discussed since the classical periods. In Ancient Greece, philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle explored the self in terms of the soul and rationality. Socrates emphasised self-knowledge, while Plato distinguished between the physical body and the immortal soul. Eastern Philosophies, such as Hinduism and Buddhism often viewed the self as an illusion (Maya) or as part of a larger universal consciousness. During the Medieval period, in Christianity, the self was viewed in relation to God, with an emphasis on introspection and the inner self, focusing on the soul’s relationship with God.

During Renaissance, humanism marked a shift towards individualism and the importance of personal experience. Thinkers like Michel de Montaigne explored the self through introspection and personal essays. Throughout the age of Enlightenment, Rationalism and Empiricism prevailed with philosophers like Descartes emphasising the self as a thinking entity (‘I think, therefore I am’). John Locke introduced the idea of the self as a tabula rasa, shaped by experiences. The 19th century was characterised by Romanticism and Psychoanalysis. While Romanticism highlighted emotion and individual experience in expressing the uniqueness of the self, Psychoanalysis introduced the idea of the unconscious mind by dividing the self into the id, the ego, and the superego. During the 20th century

In the 20th Century, Existentialism was a significant philosophical movement, with thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre emphasising the existence of the self and the freedom to define one's own identity. Humanistic Psychology also emerged, focusing on self-actualization and the inherent potential of the self. Meanwhile, in Sociology, the self was viewed as a social construct, developed through interactions with others, as seen in concepts like the “looking-glass self”. Moving into the contemporary views of the 21st century, Postmodernism challenges the notion of a fixed, coherent self, suggesting instead that the self is fragmented and constructed through language and culture. Neuroscience offers another perspective, exploring the self in terms of brain function and cognitive processes, examining how our sense of self is rooted in neural activity.

5. Discussion Points – the theme of ‘the self’

The main purpose of the third IYAB was to discuss issues relevant to the theme of ‘the self’, which was suggested by the young people themselves in the second IYAB held in September

2024. Four discussion prompts were presented to the young people to get them to engage with the concept of ‘the self’. Following each discussion prompt, young people were given five to ten minutes to brainstorm and note down potential answers to the questions asked. A summary of the answers generated for each of the four discussion prompts are delineated below.

5.1 The meaning behind the concept of ‘the self’

The first discussion prompt with which the students were presented was: “*What does the concept of ‘the self’ mean to you?*” Some participants defined ‘the self’ in relation to others and emphasised how interactions with other people can help us better understand different aspects of ourselves, a viewpoint also held by the field of Sociology beginning in the 20th century.

Other participants perceived ‘the self’ as a mixture of unchanging core values, attitudes, and behaviours, alongside those that evolve and adapt to our surroundings. It was also noted that we are all born with some innate potential and life experiences can either hinder or contribute towards the development of this potential.

Quote: “*it ties to both individuality and collectivism because you are a human inserted in an environment.*”

The ‘self’ was further construed as a constant changing entity by other YAB members.

Quote: “*Well for me...the self would be everything that someone is composed of – their attributes, flaws, interests, background. But it’s...not 100% set in stone. The self can always change...Some interests can fade...you can learn unexpected lessons. Your opinions change. It’s not something for me that’s 100% set in stone. The self for me is the full existence of a person – their past, present, and their future.*”

5.2 The benefits of focusing on ‘the self’

The second discussion question related to the process through which focusing on ‘the self’ can help address different societal issues, since in the previous IYAB meeting participants suggested that focusing on ‘the self’ has the potential to improve society. The second discussion prompt thus asked the following: “*How can a child’s development of ‘the self’ improve our society and prevent future societal issues?*”

It was suggested that by better knowing ‘the self’, people can better distinguish wrong from right, which in the long-term can prevent societal problems such as crime, discrimination, corruption, conflict and so on.

Quote: *“When children have a clear view of themselves, whatever happens in the future, they can understand what's right and wrong, and they can also know where they stand in the world. They can avoid crimes and discrimination and they know how to be tolerant.”*

It was recommended that giving children the space and time to explore themselves and their surroundings would be beneficial for them to understand their ‘true self’. YAB members argued that the self should be validated and supported from the early years of life through gentle and responsive parenting as well as through intervention and prevention programmes.

Some YAB members suggested that it is important to encourage children’s passions, interests, and talents by giving them the option to choose how they spend their free time. This would in turn help develop adults who are fulfilled and confident in their careers and do not base their life choices on the fear of being judged and/ or socially excluded.

Quote: *“...if we let children explore their interests rather than pushing some onto them, it might create a more open and understanding society with people who are actually satisfied with (...) their jobs and life. And maybe it could give more significance to, like, frowned-upon jobs or even ... hobbies. It might (...) remove that judgement of someone having a certain interest, job; someone acting a certain way...it might just create more acceptance.”*

While giving children the opportunity to understand and develop their ‘innate self’ was considered important, some young people noted that caregivers should also provide guidance. This includes instilling core values in their children, such as empathy, kindness, and ethics.

Quote: *“we should, of course, let them develop themselves, but we should try to instil some core values... And I think if every parent or person focused on their child and instilling some core values and letting them express little by little, the whole society will be impacted because if you hang out with good people, with people who encourage self-expression, who promote positive reinforcement, who have empathy and ethics, automatically the world will be a better place.”*

5.3 Support to better understand ‘the self’

The third discussion prompt focused on the process through which children can be supported to better understand themselves and the age from which this can start. The third discussion question was as follows: *“How can we support children in better understanding their own self? From what age?”*

The focus of some young people was primarily on the role that institutions, such as schools, have in helping children better understand their own identity and culture from a very young age. It was proposed that this could be done through communal activities, like cultural days, as well as through subjects such as ‘Citizenship’ or ‘Culture and Heritage’.

Other young people focused on the role that parenting has in children’s development of ‘the self’. Parenting strategies such as being gentle, encouraging, providing options, and exposing children to different opinions, cultures, interests, and ways of life could help shape well-rounded humans.

Some participants also focused on the role of governmental and non-governmental organisations in implementing programmes that could support children and their caretakers in creating safe environments whereby identity exploration is possible. It was suggested that such validating and nurturing environment should be provided from the stage of infancy.

Quote: “...emotional education, mentorship programmes in various contexts, socially mindful government policies and family support seem essential to promote the safe environment where children are able to develop their sense of self. And these should be applied in a widespread scale, over all communities and in all environments children are involved in – at this age, mainly support for families, daycares, pre and elementary schools. Even if it may seem extreme to think to invest at such an early stage, I really feel ‘a little bit goes a long way’, and the investment that may seem small with compensate tremendously long-term due to what it prevents. Children should never be an overlooked trade-off.”

5.4 Social media posts related to ‘the self’

The fourth discussion prompt asked YAB members present what social media posts they would write with regards to the ‘concept of the self’ on Universal Children’s Day, if given the opportunity. The proposed social media posts by YAB members, which are listed below, were then posted on COORDINATE’s official social media accounts, including LinkedIn and Twitter/ X.

“You’ll never know who that child will become, unless you give them the space to develop.”

“Plant the seed of identity and watch our future generations flourish.”

“This is a reminder to support your children in every endeavour they take on. They are our future and our hope for a better life in this world.”

“Show children how beautiful the world is, all it has to offer, and encourage them in their curiosity.”

“Let’s celebrate the rights, dreams, and potential of every child around the world.”

“Together we can create a brighter future with love, education, and equality for all.”

“Who am I?’ starts with support. Every child deserves a chance to discover who they are and where they belong. From family care to societal resources, it takes a village to help kids find their place in the world. Let’s be the building blocks for the village of tomorrow’s adults.

[#UniversalChildrensDay](#)”

“It’s never too early to listen. The ones who are crazy enough to dream are bold enough to live. Let us create a world that listens to children’s voices and awakens the dreamer inside each one. In every child there’s a potential waiting to be discovered.

[UniversalChildrensDay](#)”

6. Conclusion

The third International Youth Advisory Board (IYAB) held on November 20th, 2024, successfully brought together young representatives from the UK, Portugal, Croatia, and Finland to discuss the theme of 'the self'. This meeting, coinciding with Universal Children's Day, provided a platform for young people to explore and express their views on identity, individuality, and personal development.

Throughout the session, participants engaged in meaningful discussions on the importance of understanding and nurturing 'the self' from an early age. They highlighted how a supportive environment, both at home and in educational settings, can significantly contribute to a child's ability to develop a strong sense of identity. The discussions underscored the role of caregivers, educators, and policymakers in fostering environments that promote self-exploration and validation.

The insights gathered from this session emphasise the need for continued focus on child individuation and the benefits of providing children with the resources and opportunities to explore their potential. By supporting children in their journey of self-discovery, we can contribute to the development of well-rounded individuals who are better equipped to address societal challenges and contribute positively to their communities.

As we move forward, it is crucial to implement the recommendations and insights shared by the young participants. By doing so, we can ensure that future generations are empowered to understand themselves and their place in the world, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and understanding society.