

Ethnic Identity in Early Adolescence: Some Implications for Instructional Reform

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Photo: Michael J. Sexton, Texas A&M University

Educators today cannot continue to ignore the ethnic identification process and its educational implications in early adolescence. This process and its meanings for the school curriculum are indicated and discussed here.

The Confrontation:

• "I don't understand Carlos anymore. He used to be such a nice, cooperative child. Now he's hostile and angry all the time, and he seems to have some kind of personal resentment toward me. Yesterday in class he became livid and started accusing Ann of being prejudiced simply because she asked him why Hispanic Americans are brown-skinned. When I asked him what Ann had

done to deserve that kind of treatment he said I was a racist, too. I was floored! I've never heard Carlos talk like that before. He was an entirely different person. I don't know what it is, but something strange is happening to that child."

• "I tell you, Mary is about to drive me insane with her bizarre antics. There was a time not so long ago when she was a very sensible, responsible student. But, here lately she has become so unpredictable. One minute she's attentive and involved; the next minute she's sullen and withdrawn. And, this preoccupation of hers with race. I just don't know. One day all she can talk about is the greatness of Blacks; the next she takes any mention of blackness as a personal affront. This morning she arrived in class in an outfit you wouldn't believe. I know anything goes



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in dress these days, but this was ridiculous. When I mentioned it she said, 'This is my new identity. What's it to you anyway. You ain't my mama.' Imagine that—and from a seventh grader, too."

With the exception of references to ethnicity, these comments could be made by almost any teacher about most middle-school-age students. It is a well established fact that early adolescence is a difficult period for many youngsters, characterized by drastic shifts in attitudes, behaviors, emotions, and physiology. The presence of ethnicity in these anecdotes is indicative of another identity process occurring during early adolescence that further complicates social and emotional growth and development, and has serious implications for educational programming in middle and junior high schools.

The teacher in the anecdotes is correct. Something strange is indeed happening to Carlos and Mary. Their attitudes and behaviors are indications of the occurrence of a profound developmental process that is as important to educators for planning curriculum and instruction consonant with the needs and characteristics of emerg-

ing adolescents as are emotional, social, intellectual, and physiological development. Carlos and Mary, and many of their peers, especially those who are Black, Hispanic, Asian American, and American Indian, are coming to terms with and experiencing a *conscious confrontation* with their ethnic identity. Early adolescence for them may be even more traumatic because of this additional factor.

In many ways, the process of ethnic identification is parallel to the physiological and emotional growth patterns of early adolescence. Each represents a transitional stage in human development. The individual is leaving childhood and becoming an adolescent. This transition is characterized by value contradictions and ambiguities, emotional turmoil, and rapid changes. For culturally different students, personal identity dilemmas result as much from new demands associated with their racial backgrounds and ethnic group membership as the changes occurring in their bodies and their social consciousness. In a real sense, early adolescence is a state of "becoming" in which a psychological, physiological, sociological, and an ideational "transformation of identity" takes place in transescent youth.

Ethnic Awakening

Many culturally different youths experience a conscious confrontation with their ethnicity during the early adolescent years. Awareness of their ethnic and racial identity increases, and greater demands, specifically related to ethnicity, are placed upon them by both societal and ethnic group norms and expectations. These demands are often contradictory to the expectations and privileges allowed during the care-free childhood years. Thus, culturally different early adolescents are caught in the midst of a twofold dilemma: (a) the transition from childhood to adolescence common to people in general, and (b) the movement from being a child to becoming an adult within the context of particular ethnic group memberships.

Society, schools, and ethnic groups tend to be lenient with their members during the childhood years. The standards of behavior expected of children provide much flexibility and freedom. For example, free-flowing, nonrestrictive friendships and social interactions between five-, six-,



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and nine-year-olds from different ethnic and racial groups are encouraged. Youngsters are described, criticized, perceived, and praised more in terms of their characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors *as children* than as childhood members of different ethnic groups. Although young children know what their ethnic or racial identity is, this knowledge is largely existential and subliminal. It is not functional or operational in that it is consciously or overtly reflected in their social attitudes, values, and behaviors. Rather, children tend to internalize the general conceptions of themselves as "just children," and act accordingly toward their peers, regardless of ethnic or racial identity. This developmental period may be described as the preconceptual stage of ethnic identification.

For ten- to fourteen-year-olds, early adolescence is a time of ethnic initiations and confrontations. Whether formal or informal, overt or subtle, positive or negative, internal or external, these "initiations" accentuate cultural differences and propel ethnicity to a new level of consciousness in personal and interpersonal relations. With the onset of pubescence, ethnic groups and the

larger society begin to make greater demands on ethnic youth regarding their social behaviors, activities, and responsibilities to group memberships. Demands are made on young people to make a conscious commitment to their ethnicity by conforming to ethnic group norms and expectations. Simultaneously, society demands that they rise above their ethnic identity, become active members of the common culture, and live according to its rules and regulations.

Both mainstream society and ethnic communities begin to exert pressure on early adolescents to "stop being children," to "be mature," and become "responsible" group members. However, each one's criteria of maturity and responsibility are specific to its own normative structures, and may be contradictory to each other. Many transescent youth, caught in the middle of these conflicting claims, experience some ambiguities and difficulties making sense out of the contradictions, and selecting appropriate choices from among possible alternatives. They have problems knowing when and how to differentiate behaviors and values, or style-shift, to accommodate school, peer group, societal, and ethnic com-

munity expectations. The same behaviors deemed acceptable expressions of positive identity, respect, and deference to authority within ethnic communities may be interpreted as petulance, defiance, arrogance, anger, racial sensitivity, and belligerence in school.

New restrictions also are placed on interracial interactions. Youngsters in the eleven- to fourteen-year-old age group no longer have complete freedom to participate in all kinds of cross-racial social interactions. As physical maturity develops and puberty approaches, they encounter both societal and ethnic community restrictions on heterogeneous groupings and sociosexual relations. The thought of thirteen- or fourteen-year-old Blacks and Anglos pairing off and dating each other is cause for much consternation and conflict for both Blacks and Whites, in spite of the fact that the same boys and girls may have played together without any racial or sexual restrictions as nine-year-olds.

As early adolescents become more egocentric and preoccupied with self, they begin to associate physical appearance with race and ethnicity. Like any transescent females, Black and Asian American girls have ambivalent feelings about their "budding beauty." Hispanic and American Indian males wonder about their masculinity and physical attractiveness. They become conscious of "success models" and use these to evaluate their own personal attributes and progress. Frequently, the socially accepted societal models of beauty and masculinity do not accommodate ethnic and racial characteristics of culturally different groups. When early adolescents from these groups apply these criteria to themselves, the results may be devastating. Thus, the twelve- or thirteen-year-old Black girl concludes that she is ugly and always will be because she will never have long flowing blond hair, sky-blue eyes, and milk-white, creamy skin. She may compensate by totally rejecting her blackness or overemphasizing it, or fluctuating back and forth between these two extremes. And, her behaviors in instructional situations and interpersonal relations are reflective of her personal attitudes and perceptions of self.

Other ethnic confrontations occur during early adolescence. Youths become very conscious of similarities and differences between themselves

and other members of their own ethnic group, and other racial/cultural groups. They begin to associate their personal identity with ethnic group membership—for example, "Those are my people"; "I am one of them"; and so on—and are highly susceptible to the public image of their ethnic group. They experience both pride and shame, affinity and denial, acceptance and rejection toward their ethnic group. Early adolescents are also more perceptive about how their families and ethnic group members rank in the broader societal context in terms of material possessions, social acceptability, and other standards of success and desirability. The ethnic and racial attitudes, values, myths, and stereotypes they have been learning all along, but that have been rather dormant and subliminal, begin to surface and are actualized in behavior. Thus, relations among early adolescents from different cultural and ethnic groups may become tense, as racial prejudices appear to increase.

These "encounters" symbolize the emergence of a definitive ethnic awareness and a *conscious conceptualization of personal ethnic identification*. This awareness has psychological, social, and emotional dimensions. It is often accompanied by internal and interpersonal conflicts and confrontations as early adolescents attempt to resolve dilemmas and answer questions about the relationship between their personal worth and their ethnic and cultural characteristics.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Maslow's theory of human motivation and need gratification is instructive in integrating ethnic identification in early adolescence in instructional programs for middle- and junior-high-school-age students. Since the need for belongingness and self-esteem are prerequisite to self-actualization and are closely interrelated with ethnic identity, educators must incorporate ethnic identity development as an essential component into educational programs designed for early adolescents. Questions and needs of identity must be resolved satisfactorily before students can maximize the development of their intellectual and human potentials, capabilities, and talents.

Ethnic identification has both content and process implications for educating early adolescents. It is easily translatable to curriculum

design, instructional methodology, learning environments, and counseling and guidance procedures.

The education of transescents should be student-specific in that it is directly responsive to their unique needs and developmental characteristics. Since many pubescent youth encounter serious problems with their ethnicity, curricula for early adolescents should include specific courses or other structured learning experiences in social growth and development. Exploration and analysis of ethnic identity encounters and confrontations, both in personal and group context, and historical and contemporary perspective, should be integral components of these learning experiences. The primary objective should be to minimize identity traumas of early adolescence by increasing student understanding of the character, naturalness, and complexity of the developmental processes, including the social, physical, emotional, and cultural dimensions.

Content about different ethnic life styles, value systems, socialization processes, cultures, and heritages should be incorporated in all existing school curricula. For example, the domestic arts should include the study of different ethnic cuisines, cosmetics, and traditional fashions. The fine arts should explore different styles and samples of ethnic aesthetics, such as dance, drama, poetry, music, and art. In addition to poetry, prose, and novels, language arts programs should include ethnic folklore, kinetics as communication, ethnic communication styles as cultural reflectors, and symbolic language. Social studies courses should examine such issues and concepts as culture, ethnicity, identity, roles and functions of ethnic groups in American history and culture, ethnic stereotypes and racism, ethnic group contributions, and the acculturation/assimilation of ethnic individuals and groups. The primary purpose of each of these curricular areas should be to develop understanding of how these various dimensions of life contribute to the formation of ethnic identity for both individuals and groups.

All curricular plans should be accompanied by selective bibliographies that contribute to increasing understanding of ethnicity within the context of the specified subject or content area. These bibliographic selections should emphasize affective experiences of how ethnic individuals

and groups have encountered and clarified their ethnic identity. They might include autobiographies, fiction, folklore, poetry, "message" music, and drama. Such resources provide opportunities for early adolescent learners to gain a better perspective on the ethnic identification process by emphasizing with others and projecting beyond self, by realizing that others in their own and other ethnic groups have experienced identity crises similar to theirs, and by acquiring process models for dealing with their ethnic identity confrontations.

Conflict resolution should be both content and process in early adolescent education programs. The resolution of personal identity crises is extremely difficult even for mature adults who are skilled and experienced in the process. It is even more difficult for the unknowing and inexperienced pubescent youth. It can become traumatic when essential knowledge of the causes and dynamics of identity crises is lacking, confusing, or contradictory. Frequently this is the situation with early adolescents. They receive conflicting instructions on "how to behave" and "who to be" from parents, peers, teachers, ethnic communities, and society in general. Often these demands are implied, ambiguous, and arbitrary rather than being overt, concrete, and rational. More often than not in schools, confused pubescents are left to their own devices to interpret these subtle messages and to find right answers to ambiguous questions. It is understandable, then, why they experience much ambivalence and emotional turmoil associated with the development of their ethnic identification. School programs should help expedite the process. Such instructional techniques as values clarification, moral reasoning, critical incidents, phase development analysis, and introspective self-expression are invaluable tools for helping students develop knowledge, insights, and skills essential to understanding and resolving conflicts inherent in the formulation and clarification of ethnic identity.

Instructional methodologies specific to given subject areas can be employed that may help to minimize ethnic identity crises for early adolescents. Using ethnic content and materials to teach basic skills such as reading, writing, listening, and computation is one of these. For instance,

ethnic folktales can be used to teach word attack techniques, comprehension, decoding, and translation, in addition to ethnic values, role relationships, world views, racial attitudes, and ethnic allegories. Developing multiethnic repertoires of teaching examples, selected from different ethnic group experiences, to illustrate academic concepts and principles is another viable instructional technique. For example, instruction in skin care and cosmetology should include a variety of differential illustrations appropriate to the characteristic features of Blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans, American Indians, and Anglos. Modern and traditional ethnic folk dances can be taught in physical education as a technique toward achieving social interaction and physical fitness. The concept of aesthetic expression can be developed with the use of different examples of ethnic dance, art, music, poetry, communication, and fashions.

Ethnic identity for early adolescents also can be enhanced through the creation of culturally pluralistic learning environments. The presence of physical and visual imagery of ethnicity in classrooms can make the atmosphere warm and facilitative in that students see "reflections" of themselves and each other. Wall hangings, bulletin board displays, books and recordings, pictures and drawings, and other "folk objects" from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds present tangible images with which students can identify, and reinforce their feelings of personal worth. Furthermore, these artifacts serve to "expose ethnic identity to public viewing" in a safe setting. Students who dread the possibility of their own personal ethnicity being "exposed to the public" may find some support, and thus reduce some of their anxieties, from the symbolic or representational exposure of their ethnic group in classroom decorations.

Many pubescent students need professional assistance in contending with the emotional, social, and ethnic identity crises they encounter during early adolescence. Counselors are in an ideal position to assist in the ethnic identification process, presuming they understand what is happening. They should help students identify and examine the identity confrontations, clarify options and alternatives, examine consequences of behavior, and arrive at solutions to identity prob-

lems. Counselors also should help early adolescents *consciously conceptualize* their personal ethnic identity crises, understand that ethnic identification is a natural and a developmental process, understand how and why ethnic identity affects behavior and attitudes in other situations, and relate personal identity development to similar group processes. Group dynamics, psycho- and sociodramas, problem-solving, moral dilemmas and values clarification, and multiage group discussions are counseling techniques particularly useful for examining ethnic identity crises.

There are several other counseling techniques that can be employed on a schoolwide basis that contribute indirectly, but positively, to the ethnic identity development of students. One of these is allowing students from different ethnic backgrounds more flexibility in expressing their ethnicity within the boundaries of the school. A most expedient way of accomplishing this is to encourage them to use their "home-base vernaculars" in expressing personal problems and dilemmas during counseling sessions. Another way is to use "aesthetic expression" as a form of identity therapy. Identity dilemmas can be dramatized through self-produced poetry, pantomime, and drama. School hallways and classrooms can be decorated with ethnic imagery art selected and produced by students. Other counseling and administrative policies should be modified to be more facilitative of ethnic diversity rather than being primarily punitive and conformity-oriented.

Prizing and promoting ethnic and cultural diversity informally throughout the school also contribute to the personal ethnic identification process of students. Different kinds of ethnic music might be played over the intercom system during morning arrival, lunch, and afternoon student departure times. Weekly inspirational mottos and verses, selected from different ethnic heritages, can be used throughout the school year. These can be accompanied by prominently displayed exhibits of other experiences and accomplishments of the targeted ethnic group, and "on this day in history" announcements representing different ethnic groups at the beginning of the school day. Time and places should be provided throughout the school day for students who are particularly troubled with their ethnic identity to have momentary refuge from regular

activities to "get in touch with self." These might be in the form of "cooling off stations" where students can be alone, talk with someone, listen to recordings, reflect, watch a movie, filmstrip or slide presentation, or engage in some other experience that produces a calming, informative, and personally integrative effect. Such "coping stations" should be supervised, designed to accommodate individuals and groups, and include diversified stimuli that contribute to understanding the identity development process, and resolving resulting conflicts and crises.

Conclusion

We are beyond the point where instructional leaders can continue to ignore the ethnic identification process and its educational implications in early adolescence and make legitimate claims to professionalism. Ethnicity has a determinant influence upon the total developmental process, and it affects student attitudes and behaviors in school situations. Attitudes, behaviors, and predilections of students, which reflect their cultural conditioning and ethnic identity development, are requisite to individual intellectual capabilities and teacher effectiveness in achieving academic success for culturally diverse student populations. Early adolescence is the first time in the lives of many students when the question of ethnicity surfaces and begins to consciously affect personal and interpersonal behaviors, attitudes, and interactions. Therefore, if maximal social growth and educational success are to be achieved for early adolescent learners, it is imperative for educators to become more knowledgeable of and responsive to the ethnic identification process as they design and implement instructional programs in middle and junior high schools. *FL*



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