

Black Fish in a White Pond

Identity Development of African American Students in Predominately White Suburban Schools

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Introduction

The issues that African American students face daily in suburban schools are different from what their White counterparts as well as other African American students living in urban areas face. Such issues are grounded in the cultural and social identity development of individuals.

Not only do African American students have to learn to deal with the pitfalls of school but they must navigate the murky waters of identity development at the same time. This notion is underscored by Tatum (1997), who pointed out that “the search for personal identity that intensifies in adolescence can involve several dimensions of an adolescent’s life: vocational plans, religious beliefs, values, and preferences, political affiliations and beliefs, gender roles, and ethnic identities” (p. 53).

Adolescent identity development, whether racial and/or ethnic or social, is defined by the perceptions that young people have of themselves and the perceptions that others have about them. How adolescents think others see them is very important in the framework of identity development, particularly for African Americans. As with most people, African American students want to feel accepted and validated as they figure out “who am I?” and “what does it mean to be a young African American in the 21st century?”

Since we do not form our identity in a vacuum but in the context of our surroundings and with the people we know (Koppelman, 2011), finding a balance between

identity development and effective schooling for minority students is essential.

One cannot discuss identity development without mentioning cultural and social development. Students’ cultures are not separate from their identities. Our identities and who we perceive ourselves to be are intertwined with the aspects of our culture. African American children who are being raised in predominantly White, middle-class, suburban environments, who have no other frame of reference to quantify that identity, face some special challenges presented by the school environments of those suburban areas.

Venzant Chambers and McCready (2011) underscored this notion with findings from their case study research. They concluded that African American students can be potentially marginalized on the basis of their racial and class identities and also on the “basis of and in combination with other identities” (p. 1373). Thus, it is important to understand the impact of identities on the education of students.

Nieto and Bode (2018) lent support to this statement by offering that “there is often a direct connection between culture and the sociopolitical context of schooling” (p. 148). In other words, the social, economic, and political salient factors of schools affect the learning of minority students.

Thus this article briefly explores the sociopolitical context of school as it applies to the cultural identity development of African American students and their education in predominately White, middle-class, suburban schools. Topics of discussion include (a) cultural and social identity development, (b) sociopolitical context of schooling and multicultural education, (c) minority students and the classroom, and (d) addressing the needs of students of color, particularly African Americans, in predominately White, middle-class, suburban schools.

Cultural and Social Identity Development

African American students and other students of color are faced with myriad challenges in school. Many of these challenges are certainly different than those challenges encountered by their White counterparts. Such challenges include navigating the school dynamics in the classroom where the majority group does not look like them. The school dynamic is all-encompassing in that it includes every aspect of the environment, from a ride on the school bus to participation in extracurricular activities.

Since African American students have to function in such environments, it is important to understand how the sociopolitical nature of these environments affects their schooling. Thus, a discussion on how the cultural and social identities of these students are formed is warranted.

African American students, as all students, come to school with a set of personal attributes or characteristics that are uniquely their own. These characteristics influence how a student will learn and succeed academically. Banks and Banks (2016) offered that teachers’ understanding of and knowledge about the groups students identify with sheds light on potential student behavior. African American students can and will identify with a multitude of groups at one time or another in their journey to forming their social and cultural identities.

Diversity variables intersect one another and play a major role in the behavior of students. Banks (2014) asserted that the diversity variables of social class, racial group, language, abilities and disabilities, religion, sexual orientation, gender, ethnic identity, and the extent to which a student identifies with his or her ethnic group intersect and interact in various ways

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to influence the behavior of the student. Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2012) identified 12 sources of cultural identity. These sources of cultural identity include all of the aforementioned variables in Banks' (2014) intersection of diversity variables, with the addition of health, age, and geographic region.

The diversity variables with which students identify provide a source of motivation to engage in personal interactions with others. It is important to note that interactions among students are shaped by their identification with any of these variables or sources of cultural identity (Cushner et al., 2012). Thus it is incumbent upon educators to understand the nature of social and cultural influences and the roles these variables play in the education of African American students in predominantly White suburban schools.

These students are not only wrestling with their social and cultural identity development but they are trying to do so while functioning against the backdrop of a predominantly White, middle-class educational philosophy. This educational philosophy has a focus on teaching the mainstream-centric curriculum—a curriculum that reflects the dominant culture and experiences of mainstream America (Banks, as cited in Banks & Banks 2016).

Banks (as cited in Banks & Banks, 2016), as a pioneer of multiculturalism, further offered that a mainstream-centric curriculum presents negative consequences not only for students of color but for all students. Such a curriculum ignores the experiences and histories of those individuals with diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Students of color need to feel a strong sense of validation and less alienation because of the cultural differences between their home and school environments.

An acknowledgment of African American students' social and cultural identities is necessary for providing a solid education for these students. Teachers must have an awareness of how their beliefs about social and cultural identity inform their teaching practices and influence the academic success of all students. What is it that teachers need to know about the cultural and social identities of students? An explanation of cultural and social identities is offered in the following paragraphs.

Given the attributes or characteristics that make us who we are, *cultural identity* is membership within multiple groups that intersect and influence one another (Banks, 2014; Cushner et al., 2012; Gollnick

& Chinn, 2017). Furthermore, Gollnick and Chinn asserted that our cultural identities are not fixed; they change as life experiences influence our cultural group memberships. Students' understanding of their multiple group membership and how their cultural identity is a manifestation of the intersection of these groups helps them to answer the question "who am I?"

Thus, not only do students need to have an understanding of cultural identity but teachers must be cognizant of their own cultural identities and how their multiple group memberships influence the teaching of African American students in predominantly White, middle-class, suburban schools.

Social identity is very similar in nature to the cultural identity we develop as individuals. However, social identity is how we view ourselves based on our membership in cultural groups. In other words, our social identity is also our self-concept—beliefs about ourselves. Specifically, *self-concept* "refers to individuals' beliefs about themselves in academic, social, athletic, and personal domains" (Hattie, as cited in Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2014, p. 58).

The self-concept definition can be taken one step further in that it also expresses how individuals perceive themselves based on how others perceive them. Hence, identifying with and participating in various cultural groups are very important to the cultural identity formation and education of African American students. Furthermore, these students seek validation from their teachers, peers, and the various cultural groups with which they identify.

To be in concert with an explanation of cultural and social identities, a brief exploration of identity development as it relates to African American students and their racial identity is warranted. The stages of identity development for these students juxtaposed against the philosophical nature of being educated in predominantly White schools presents a challenge for them.

Identity development for students begins at an early age. Moreover, it is during adolescence that all students begin to struggle with such issues as self-consciousness, social acceptance, and appearance. However, for African American adolescent students, the issues of race, ethnicity, and seeking to understand the question of "who am I?" are added dimensions to personal identity development. Tatum (1997) offered that African American students think of themselves in terms of race because that is how the world thinks of them.

African American adolescents are constantly bombarded by messages of how to think, behave, dress, and speak. They are in a constant battle with themselves and the world to try to measure up to those who they perceive as role models and those who they are strongly encouraged to emulate (to be less Black and more White). This phenomenon is no different in the classroom. Teachers' perceptions, pedagogical practices, and hidden curricula send a message that "I can only teach you the same way I teach my White students."

What are African American students experiencing during their identity development? According to Cross (1991), there are five stages of racial identity development: *pre-encounter* (students begin to embrace the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture and buy in to the negative stereotypes exacerbated by mainstream media), *encounter* (students begin to acknowledge the impact of race and question negative stereotypes), *immersion-emersion* (individuals begin to embrace their ethnic identity and resist the nature to hate themselves based on negative stereotypes, and they begin to completely immerse themselves in their culture), *internalization* (individuals embrace the dominant culture while maintaining their own ethnic culture; they are secure in their sense of self as a racial being), and *internalization-commitment* (individuals have devised a way to translate a personal sense of self as a racial being in addressing the concerns of people of color and other social justice issues).

Cross's model of assertions of Black identity development was first referred to as "nigrescence" or "the process by which a person becomes Black" (Helms, 1990, p. 17). Although there are a few interpretations of this model, two stages are pivotal in the cultural identity development of African American adolescents. The pre-encounter and encounter stages of Cross's model are most important in the cultural identity development of African American adolescents because it is in these two stages that African American students feel the most pressure to belong and answer the "who am I?" question.

Sociopolitical Context of Schooling and Multicultural Education

Along with an understanding of cultural and social identity development, it is important to address how the nature of schooling affects the education of African American students. To begin, there must

be an understanding of the sociopolitical context of school and what that means with regard to how African American students function in school environments. The sociopolitical context of schooling encompasses all of the entities and dynamics of schools that inherently affect how students are educated.

Nieto and Bode (as cited in Banks & Banks, 2016) imparted that “sociopolitical context underscores that education is part and parcel of larger societal and political forces, such as inequality based on stratification due to race, social class, gender, and other differences” (p. 260). It is within this definition that school practices such as ability grouping, high-stakes testing, school reform, curriculum changes, and teaching strategies have the propensity to be influenced by societal and political forces that are considered in the decision process of how and what is taught in schools. At times, these decisions do not support the academic success of African American students, particularly those being educated in predominantly White, suburban schools.

For example, the use of ability grouping to place some students in less rigorous academic tracks ensures that these students will not go beyond high school. Teaching practices that do not take into consideration the students’ cultural backgrounds or do not validate the cultural identities of students are another example of how societal and political forces influence schooling. In this case, it is easier to teach or educate all students in the same way than it is to consider that all students learn differently.

When a salient characteristic of a student’s identity is disregarded in schools, it results in cultural discontinuities and inequities of education for all students. When there are no cultural connections in education being made, African American and other students of color are left out of the education dynamic, ultimately setting them up for academic failure. Schooling that is multiculturally responsive can address the cultural discontinuities from negative societal and political forces of educational practices.

Banks (2014) defined multicultural education as an idea or concept, a reform movement, and a process with a major goal to equitably educate all students regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, social class, or ethnic, racial, and cultural characteristics. This definition encompasses variables that address the cultural and social identities of students and the impor-

ance of structuring school environments around those variables. However, for the context of this article, an explanation of how multicultural education is defined in a sociopolitical context is needed. An understanding of this concept gives an idea of its importance to the education of African American students in predominantly White, suburban schools.

The sociopolitical context of multicultural education is by no means the answer to all that ails education. However, it is a concept that provides a different lens through which to view and potentially address school reform and unfair practices, such as high-stakes testing and tracking, that consistently undermine the academic achievement of minority students. Nieto (as cited in Nieto & Bode, 2018) offered the best definition of multicultural education in a sociopolitical context with the following statement:

Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic gender, and sexual orientation, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the school’s curriculum and instructional strategies as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (p. 32)

This definition supports the idea that knowledge about and understanding of the cultural and social identities of all students are detrimental to the education of these students. Students’ ethnic and cultural differences must be validated and affirmed, not seen as deficits, so as to promote a school culture that empowers and supports them and provides an education that creates critical thinkers and social justice advocates. Hence what happens in the classroom is extremely important, as it builds on the cultural contributions of students.

Minority Students and the Classroom

It is not easy for students to sit in a classroom day after day and never feel involved in their own education. While

students have some responsibility for their own education, it is up to the teacher to engage and encourage students in the classroom. African American students in predominantly White, suburban schools can experience the challenges of reconciling their own cultural and ethnic identities, finding a niche in a school environment where they are being marginalized and sometimes rendered voiceless, and excelling in a school setting with a curriculum that places minimal value on their cultural background.

For example, African American students should not have to (a) speak for an entire race, (b) defend their right to identify with any and all cultural groups of their choosing, or (c) be subjected to incidents of microaggressions based on their cultural group identities. When African American students walk into a classroom and all that they see on the walls and learn about in readings, lectures, and assignments are the achievements of people who do not look like them, what message is school sending these students? The message is that they are not worth a change in curriculum, pedagogy or teaching practices, and teacher beliefs.

It is the responsibility and the duty of the classroom teacher to provide instruction that embraces diversity and cultivates a classroom environment that offers a sense of belonging for all students. A failure to do so will negatively impact the academic achievement of these students. We do a disservice to students when we discount cultural aspects of learning (Gay, 2010).

While multicultural education has made significant strides in addressing issues of diversity and all that it encompasses in schools, more work is still needed. With an influx of minority students attending suburban schools, the need to develop other ways to educate a diverse student population becomes more important. Specifically, teachers need to develop skills to work with other allies in changing and/or challenging school policies, practices, and legislation that have systematically worked against marginalized groups (Spradlin & Parsons, 2008).

From the teacher’s perspective, there needs to be an understanding of many factors that influence the teaching of students. Understanding the influences of such factors as teacher’s personal beliefs about race and ethnicity, social class and privilege, and the influence of culture on learning is required for making a change in how students of color are taught. Therefore the key question is, what can educators do to ensure African American students

who are being educated in predominantly White, suburban schools are academically successful?

Addressing the Needs of Students of Color

An awareness of the personal, social, and academic issues that students of color face on a daily basis while being educated in a predominantly White, suburban school environment becomes keenly important as these schools become more culturally and ethnically diverse. The complexities of cultural, ethnic, and social identities of students must be considered while building a sense of community in the classroom.

It is incumbent on professional educators to understand that teaching practices, curricular material, and school policies must change to meet the diverse needs of a growing population. There are important ways to address the academic needs of not just African American students but all students in predominantly White school environments.

Multicultural education offers some key solutions to addressing the needs of these students; however, the multicultural education umbrella is extremely broad. It is important to note that multicultural education goes beyond celebrating Black History Month in February or Hispanic Heritage Month between September and October. Implementing multicultural education requires reforming education from curriculum materials to instructional practices.

With regard to instructional practices, an essential pedagogical practice of multicultural education is culturally responsive teaching (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gollnick & Chinn, 2017). Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that affirms and validates the cultural aspects of students and views them as strengths and assets to the teaching process (Gollnick & Chinn, 2017).

In other words, it is classroom teaching that reflects students' cultures and is based on the notion that culture plays a role in the way students learn (Gay, 2010; Hollins, 2011; Nieto, 2010). Current curriculum and teaching practices tend to incorporate the histories and cultures of the dominant culture, while ignoring or minimizing the contributions and importance of other

cultural, ethnic, and racial groups. Culturally responsive teaching seeks to make teaching about all cultural groups more equitable.

Culturally responsive teaching includes the component of employing instructional practices and curriculum material that reflect life experiences and interests of all cultural, ethnic, and racial groups (Banks & Banks, 2010). This type of teaching affirms the ethnic identities and cultural backgrounds of all students, thus making a classroom environment conducive to learning for all students.

So what can teachers and educators do to support the academic success of all students? Some recommendations follow. Educators should:

1. Create caring learning communities that demonstrate through high teacher expectations and positive attitudes the capabilities of all students;
2. Acknowledge and validate the cultural backgrounds and experiences of all students;
3. Incorporate multiple ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic perspectives in classroom activities (Gollnick & Chinn, 2017);
4. Help students critically think about sensitive oppressive issues such as racism, discrimination, classism, and sexism; and
5. Empower students to become advocates of social justice by modeling that behavior in the classroom. (Gollnick & Chinn, 2017)

While these are only a few key recommendations, they form a beginning for creating a classroom that speaks to the needs of African American students.

Finally, as the African American student population increases in predominantly White, suburban school districts, there is a need to understand how the cultural and social identity development of these students affects their education. It is imperative that educators understand that the cultural and ethnic identities and group membership that African American students embrace impact their learning.

Therefore, changes in pedagogical practices and curriculum reform are crucial to addressing the academic needs of these students. As diversity grows in the suburban classroom, so must the commitment of educators to help all students succeed academically.

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