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"Seeing Yourself in the Story:" The Influence of Multicultural Education on Adolescent Identity Formation

Abstract

This article explores theoretical and empirical research conducted regarding adolescent identity formation and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Research shows that adolescence is a critical period for identity development, with educational settings serving as a primary site of socialization and peer pressure. Historically, schools have marginalized students whose lived experiences differ from those expressed in many of the stories told within the English classroom. In contrast, culturally sustaining pedagogical practices place a value on storytelling, allowing students to share their unique perspectives and viewing their personal narratives as valued among their peers. Utilizing this research framework, the article provides practical applications for using culturally sustaining pedagogy to promote knowledge construction, cultural appreciation, and positive identity formation as students "see themselves in the story" of their middle school English language arts classroom.

I. Introduction

"Why do we have to read this?"

"This book is boring!"

"Is this book actually important?"

If you've heard any of these questions from your students, then you, like me, may face the challenge, and great privilege, of confronting issues of identity and representation within your classroom. Particularly during the middle school years, a turbulent time of peer pressure and identity formation, students often begin questioning social structures, school expectations, and even the very texts they are required to read in class. As educators who "in charge" of our classrooms, we may view such questions as a threat or challenge to our perceived sense of control and authority. Nevertheless, we should not shy away from these questions; rather, we should embrace them, recognizing the inherent value they will add to our classroom, in the form of critical inquiry, higher-level knowledge construction, and cultural recognition and appreciation. When we require students to read certain texts without acknowledging the unique cultural experiences of individuals, we fail to express appreciation for the identities of our students. On the other hand, when students can critically examine course material, they

are allowed to view their personal narratives as valued and important within the larger classroom discussion. Utilizing a theoretical framework for adolescent identity formation, this article provides practical applications of culturally sustaining pedagogy that allow students to "see themselves in the story" through knowledge construction and cultural appreciation within a middle school English language arts classroom.

II. Adolescent Identity Formation Theory

Amidst the ongoing processes of moral, cognitive, and social development occurring during middle school, adolescents also engage prominently in identity formation. Identity, "a matter of determining who one is and who one decides to be," is related to conceptions of the self, although "neither term is easy to define" (Moshman, 2011, p. 117). In line with the work of Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg, Erik Erikson (1968) postulated eight developmental stages, with adolescence serving as a period for a crisis between identity and role confusion. Critical to this theory is the belief that problems in the earlier stages may "decrease the likelihood of positive outcomes," while, in contrast, a strong adolescent identity may set one "on the right course" for adulthood (Moshman, 2011, p. 119). Kroger's (1993) research supports Erikson's theory that adolescence is the most active period for identity crises and formation (Moshman, 2011, p. 121).

Relational processes are critical to identity formation for adolescents, with the school setting serving as a primary site of social interaction. Flum and Kaplan (2012) find the simultaneous processes of reflection and observation, by which adolescents "judge themselves in light of what others perceive them to be," key to identity formation (p. 241). Conflicts over "multiple selves" proliferate during adolescence, as socialization through peer feedback influences "internalization" of various qualities (Harter, 1999, p. 349). While forming friendships and identities, adolescents often cope with victimization, exclusion, and peer pressure. Within schools, two dimensions of identity formation-value (internal degree of importance) and belonging (external desire for attachment)-help mediate academic and social self-efficacy for adolescents (Matthews et al., 2014, p. 2357).

While value and belonging are critical for all students, Matthews et al. (2014) find that these two dimensions are particularly salient for marginalized and underserved adolescents, particularly African American and Latino students (p. 2370). For minority students, factors such as cafeteria seating, academic tracking, and stereotypes influence cultural understanding and identity formation (Stoughton & Siverson, 2005). Unfortunately, many schools historically have "informally perpetuated the racial order," leaving African Americans subject to "stereotypical negative expectations" (Tatum, 2004, p. 121). When students are required to read certain stories and discuss topics with little or no relevance to their lived experiences, they are subtly and repeatedly reminded that their identities and cultures are "less important to know." For minority adolescents to know

there is a "heritage of excellence they can aspire to," schools require authentic spaces of "counter-storytelling" that challenge traditional stories, encourage critical inquiry, and promote cross-cultural identity formation (Stoughton & Siverson, 2005).

III. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

To address this problematic lack of inclusion of minority voices and identities in the classroom, Ladson-Billings (1995) outlined a framework for culturally relevant pedagogy committed to collective empowerment of student and their identities. This groundbreaking work helped to shift the view of culture from an obstacle to a vehicle for learning. Paris (2012) shifted Ladson-Billings' term and stance from culturally *relevant* to culturally *sustaining* to place focus on the value of "linguistic and cultural dexterity necessary for success and access in a changing world" (p. 95). Using the relationship between African American language (AAL) and "standard" English as an example, Paris and Alim (2014) argue that culturally sustaining pedagogy should teach students to be flexible "across multiple languages and cultural ways of life," placing value on the unique lived experiences of all students (p. 96).

Within a classroom, especially an English language arts classroom, culturally sustaining pedagogy has the power to positively transform cross-cultural identity formation. Across the literature, an emergent theme is the power of storytelling, and "story listening," to entwine personal and community narratives with literary narratives experienced in texts (Trimble, 2016, p. 191). Keehn (2015) finds that students engage more and show more successful outcomes when personal stories are included in instruction, even those of students belonging to a different cultural group. Furthermore, the construction of personal narratives "gives meaning to multiplicity, enhancing self-understanding and self-worth" and revealing how unique identities fit within a multicultural world (Harter, 1999, p. 348; MCUE, 2008). Particularly within an English language arts classroom, the inclusion of texts that feature multicultural characters or reflect the experiences of students allows minorities to engage with the ways "power, privilege, and position" shape their identities (Greene, 2016; Ainsworth, 2016). Bilingual books and comics are two additional forms of media that allow adolescents to critically engage with issues of cross-cultural identity formation (Puzio et al., 2017; Low, 2015).

While there is no shortage in research related to identity, explicit literature on the links between identity, knowledge construction, and English language arts education is limited (Flum & Kaplan, 2012). In particular, research into the effects and practical implications of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) are critical. CSP is not a one-size-fits-all incorporation of "diverse stories, language, and food" (Puzio et al, 2017). Additionally, CSP must continue to critique regressive practices, such as racism, homophobia, and sexism to promote "critical consciousness" and reflect the "increasingly fluid understanding of the relationship

between language, culture, and race" (Paris & Alim, 2014, 90, 93). As cultures and demographics change, so too must conceptions of identity within schools and classrooms. Finally, recognizing that notions of belonging, value, and identity "have been shown to have task-specificity," future research must examine identity formation in different subject areas (Matthews et al, 2014, p. 2371). Within this theoretical and research framework, this paper seeks to explore some practical applications of culturally sustaining pedagogy within an English language arts classroom to promote knowledge construction adolescent identity formation.

IV. Practical Applications for the English Language Arts Classroom

Considering this framework for adolescent identity formation and culturally sustaining pedagogy, there are several practical applications that English language arts educators can implement to help students create meaning and engage with complex and unfamiliar texts. In particular, adopting a culturally sustaining pedagogy framework has allowed me to create a caring and supportive moral classroom community that values all cultures and identities. Serving in a predominantly minority, underserved school, after attending majority White, middle class schools for my own education, required a significant change in my own mindset. While I consciously treat all students with the same dignity and respect, I certainly did not have the "conceptual framework"

for understanding cultural patterns in my African American students' behavior (Tatum, 2004). As a result, I often felt overwhelmed and unequipped to understand the identities of my students, which could lead to racial tensions when a cultural process (i.e. talking loudly) was misconstrued as inappropriate behavior.

While pleased with the progress I have made so far to foster positive relationships and apply cultural competency in my classroom, I plan to reduce cultural miscommunication by highlighting positive racial identities with my students. For example, by inviting speakers, including a police officer, a firefighter, and a social justice worker to come speak to the class about positive community relations, I have sought to engage my students in a critical dialogue and examine more than one side to the popular racial narrative. Additionally, my "Living Wax Museum" project grants students an opportunity to embody famous African American and Hispanic writers and research their history, cultural background, and written works. This project helps students combat negative stereotypes by exploring "the heritage of minority excellence to which they can aspire" (Tatum, 2004).

Educators have a moral imperative to appreciate and utilize all languages, literacies, and cultural ways of life to promote healthy identity formation in the classroom (Paris, 2012, p. 96). For English language arts teachers, expressing appreciation for and value of different languages and literacies is critical. Many of my students

utilize African American Language (AAL) in their daily conversations. When educators label this language as "slang" or improper in contrast to "standard" English, students who speak AAL may internalize identities of inferiority (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 95-96). In contrast, I have sought to utilize the unique linguistic and cultural practices of my students to integrate a stronger sense of cross-cultural identity within the curriculum. For example, during our fall poetry unit, we analyze familiar hip-hop songs that use AAL and are full of rich poetic meaning, particularly figurative language and sound devices. While teaching grammar lessons, I emphasize the different "registers" of language, with certain forms of writing requiring formal English grammar and others (i.e. text messages, conversations, song lyrics) utilizing cultural linguistic techniques. Through these strategies, I try to convey to my students that their voices and identities not only are meaningful and valued in my classroom, but also are critical windows through which we can engage with literature (Paris & Alim, 2014).

As the title of this paper suggests, "seeing yourself in the story" through multicultural education can promote healthy adolescent identity formation. Unfortunately, all too often, a significant portion of students have their voices silenced and cannot see themselves represented in the stories told in many classrooms across the nation. As an English language arts teacher serving a predominantly minority student population, I feel a particular responsibility and necessity to provide my students with authentic spaces for "counter-storytelling" and identity formation and expression (Stoughton & Siverson, 2005). The first step in enacting this process is making it clear to students that the classroom is a "collective of stories and that the interplay amongst all participants and texts is valued" (Trimble, 2016, p. 189). While as the teacher I am responsible for leading instruction, I try to make it known to my students from the first day of school that my narrative is no more important than the narratives of all students. Signs hung on the walls and reminder statements at the start of discussions serve as constant reminders that our classroom community is one of respect and belonging, rather than imbalance and injustice.

In helping my students "see themselves in the story" of our classroom and global communities, I actively incorporate their personal narratives within the Language Arts content. Senses of belonging and positive identity formation have been shown to have "task-specificity," implying that certain classroom activities are more likely to promote these desired outcomes (Matthews et al., 2014, p. 2371). Reflective writing and journaling are particularly critical narrative techniques that I regularly incorporate in my classroom. However, writing is just a starting point for bringing the personal narrative into a "community storytelling and story listening experience" (Trimble, 2016, p. 191). After particular journal prompts, our class forms a circle and shares our narrative experiences with one another, fostering a sense of cross-cultural identity formation. Our short story unit, when students craft

their own narratives set within their local Richmond context, is a critical step in the process of knowledge construction and cultural discussion within my classroom. After analyzing the various elements of a short story (plot, character, conflict, setting, dialogue, etc.) within mentor texts, students then are given the opportunity to engage more deeply with these elements in their own writing. Although all stories must be set within a Richmond setting, each highlights the unique perspectives and identities of my students. By compiling the stories into a collection at the unit's conclusion, I am able to create a physical product that highlights the value of both the similarities and the differences among students' cultural identities and experiences.

Students should be given opportunities to literally "see themselves in the story" through cultural representation in the novels, stories, and media they read. As noted in the introduction, my students have often complained about having to read a "boring" book that "has nothing to do with me." While constrained by the text sets available within our schools, we must recognize the need for culturally diverse literature, in which our students are represented through characters, settings, conflicts, and themes. I have consulted a variety of online sources to compile a list of multicultural texts to share with my students (see resources in Appendix) and was blessed to add over twenty of these novels to my classroom library this year via Amazon Wish List donations. Furthermore, I was able to earn grant funding to purchase class text sets for three of these multicultural novels (Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover*, Annie Donwerth-Chickamatsu's *Somewhere Among*, and Alan Gratz's *Refugee*). At the end of the school year, these novels will be used as part of a unit that focuses on the power of narrative to convey a perspective and evoke empathy. Using the novels as mentor texts, students will craft their own narrative essays about moments of vulnerability within their own lives. Thus, this unit allows students to meaningfully engage with and apply classroom texts to their own lived experiences, while also connecting with characters and stories across cultures.

Additionally, I have explored my online textbook to find culturally relevant short stories and texts that may appeal to my students' developmental and identity needs. "Born Worker" by Gary Soto, "Amigo Brothers" by Piri Thomas, and "Thank You Ma'm" by Langston Hughes are simply a few of the many online short stories that produced particularly memorable cross-cultural identity formation and meaningful discussion. With Hispanic and African American characters and settings, these stories provided my students with an opportunity to "see themselves" as part of not only the text, but also the larger universal moral themes addressed. The resulting conversations of these stories were thus more engaging and resulted in higher-level knowledge construction as students synthesized and applied story elements to their own lived cultural experiences and identities.

Through storytelling strategies, adolescents

can construct counter narratives to challenge mainstream beliefs about identity. In my classroom, I utilize a variety of media to allow my students to participate in this constructive storytelling process. During our Holocaust novel study unit and concurrent research writing unit, students utilize digital technology to create public service announcements and messages about racial, cultural, and social injustice occurring around the world today. Through these digital projects, students not only participate in the curriculum, but also engage in critical literacy, identity formation, and meaning making, constructing their own knowledge about the world around them (Greene, 2016).

Comic strips are another form of media through which students can share counter narratives. Following novel or short story units, students can create comics that "complicate gender expectations, contest racial silencing, and re-narrate identity" in the traditional, White-dominant texts that are considered "canonical" or "essential" reads in a middle school language arts classroom (Low, 2015). Thus, in addition to "seeing themselves in the story," my students also can challenge mainstream conceptions about identity, reexamining the knowledge they have been taught is "important" to their own lives. While classic texts such as *The Giver*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *To Kill A Mockingbird* are valuable and developmentally appropriate for a middle school classroom, students must be provided opportunities to see the themes and elements of these stories as relevant and meaningful within their own lives. The

option to create a counter narrative (i.e. through a comic strip) provides students with meaningful engagement with these texts, while also allowing them to foster the higher-level thinking skills that accompany such a meaning-making process.

V. Conclusion

Quite simply, identity formation is the work of adolescence. As a state of "active tension constantly in a process of reevaluation," identity seemingly defies definition and varies for each individual (Moshman, 2011, p. 128). As I'm sure all educators can attest to, there is no one strategy or practice that will fit the developmental needs of all adolescents (Harter, 1999, p. 347). Nevertheless, educators have a moral imperative to develop inclusive and supportive classrooms that reflect appreciation and respect for the diverse backgrounds of all students. Strategies may vary for elementary or high school level classrooms, but ultimately all educators must provide outlets for their students to critically engage with course material.

I am not arguing that we should rid our bookshelves of the developmentally appropriate "canonical" texts that have been taught for years (and in some cases, decades) within a middle school classroom. However, if we are teaching these novels with little or no recognition of the unique cultural differences that our students bring to the classroom, we are missing out on transformative opportunities to engage their own narratives in the process of learning. In contrast, when we allow students to

question and challenge traditional texts and insert their own perspectives, we effectively say, "Your personal experiences are just as valuable to know in this classroom as those of these authors and writers." At such a critical junction of development, the benefits of positive reinforcement of students' identities and narratives cannot be understated. By utilizing culturally sustaining pedagogical strategies that help students to "see themselves in the story" and construct knowledge and meaning within the text, educators foster positive cross-cultural understanding and respect during this most critical period of identity development.

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Appendix
Resources for Multicultural Texts

School Library Journal's "An Expanded Cultural Diversity Booklist"

Colours of Us "21 Multicultural Middle Grade Novels for Summer Reading"

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