

Ethnic Identity Exploration in Education Promotes African American Male Student Achievement

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Although a strong sense of ethnic identity has been demonstrated to be a salient factor in African American male students' academic achievement, ethnic identity is generally avoided in schools because of fears of race and ethnicity among teachers and because of romantic notions of the "melting pot" in the general population. To assist teachers in the critical tasks of facilitating their students' ethnic identity development while improving their academic achievement, the author developed the four dimensions of Ethnic Identity Exploration in Education. Each of the four dimensions is explained briefly and examples for implementation of the dimension are provided.

Keywords: Ethnic identity exploration in education, increasing academic achievement, school success, ethnic/racial identity, teacher education

As an African American male teacher educator, I am troubled by the underachievement of African American male students. In my state of California, the largest and most culturally diverse state, African Americans had the highest dropout and the lowest graduation rates of any ethnic/racial group in 2012 (California Department of Education, 2013). California is not alone. In 2011, Lee and Ransom reported that the high dropout rate, as well as, the low high school completion and college going rates for African American students had reached alarming proportions nationally. In order to reverse these trends, I want to propose ethnic identity exploration in education as an important curricular component in teacher education and in any comprehensive plan for closing the gap between African American male academic achievement and excellence. The focus on the "gap" between African American student achievement and White student achievement that is popular in academic literature is misplaced and misguided. I reject the paradigm of White student achievement as *the* standard for African American male student achievement. Excellence, not white student achievement, should be the standard by which African American male student achievement is measured. The inclusion of ethnic identity exploration in teacher preparation curricula is compelling for at least three reasons: 1) scholars have found ethnic identity to be associated with numerous school success factors (Adelabu, 2008; Chavous, 2003), 2) ethnicity and race are salient within the school context and in popular culture (Carcamo, 2013; Lynden, 2013; Obama, 2013), and 3) ethnic identity is an area in which teachers are inadequately prepared (Gay, 2010).

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Ethnic/Racial Identity: A Critical Developmental Process and an Important School Success Factor

Teacher educators and psychologists agree that ethnic identification is critical to one's overall psychological well being (Banks, 1994; Cross, 1991; Phinney & Ong, 2007), and as a developmental process, ethnic identity is similar in importance to cognitive, physical, and social development (Branch, 2012; Gay 1985). Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff (2003) found that ethnic identity development was an important factor in the psychological and emotional adjustment of African American adolescents. Sadly, there are frequent examples of African American students wrestling with issues of ethnic identity within the school context without curricular or educator support (Capacio, 2013; Fishlock, 2010; Lynden, 2013; Reynolds, 2012; Singh, 2012). Now, when racial bullying is on the rise, African American students in this critical time of ethnic identity development find themselves having to defend their right to be African American. While students of all ethnic groups are victims of racial bullying, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that African American and Latino "youth who are bullied are more likely to suffer academically than their white peers" (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). I argue that ethnic identity exploration in education will act as a buffer to attacks on ethnicity for African American male students. Moreover, ethnic identity exploration in education will engender ethnic security and pride for all students and will help to eliminate ethnic and racial bullying.

Psychologists and teacher educators agree that nurturing ethnic identity development within the school context provides scholastic benefits (Gay, 1985; Banks, 1994). One of the advantages of a strong sense of African American ethnic identity is higher academic achievement (Adelabu, 2008). Adelabu studied ethnic identity, future time perspective and hope among rural and urban African American adolescents. She found that ethnic identity exploration was a significant predictor of academic achievement for African American students. Students who expressed an interest in learning more about their ethnic group (exploration) earned higher grades than those who expressed less interest in their ethnic group. Chavous et al. (2003) studied 606 African Americans from four high schools over a three-year period and found significant positive relationships between private regard (strong group pride) and high school attendance, high school completion, and college attendance. Additionally, these researchers found that strong group pride was related more positively to academic beliefs, i.e., students with high private regard enjoyed going to school, believed school was both important and relevant to their lives, and thought it would be useful for their future. It seems reasonable, then, for schools to provide opportunities for students to explore their ethnicity within the school context in order to engender a sense of ethnic belonging and to promote academic achievement.

Why Teachers Avoid Ethnic/Racial Identity In School

Having taught pre-service teachers for seventeen years at three large urban universities, I have consistently heard credential candidates describe their fears of discussions of race and their eagerness to discuss commonalities between races. As a result of nearly two decades of listening to pre-service teachers, and comparing their assertions about race and ethnicity to the relevant academic literature, I have concluded that there are two related explanations for the lack of curricular attention to ethnic identity in our nation's schools: fear of race (and race-related topics such as ethnicity) and the myth of the melting pot. First, a majority of the predominantly White

and female teaching force in America's schools (Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2013) have a fear of race and related topics (e.g., ethnicity). Many of my students and individuals in the larger society can remember what is still a common experience of some children of having parents shield their eyes and slap their hands when they point out racial differences. Children learn and internalize from these very early experiences that there is something wrong with recognizing color differences in people. Because parents do not usually explain their violent response to their children seeing color, the children do not learn why it is wrong for them to see color, but they do learn that discussing color/race in human beings is taboo. As children grow, sometimes their learned fear of noticing racial differences is compounded by a negative experience with an individual in their racial out-group (e.g., a school yard fight or being forbidden by a parent to play with a Black child). This fear, often felt early in one's life, is often intensified later on by new experiences of hurt having to do with issues of race and ethnicity. Many of my students describe a "churning" of their stomachs at the very mention of race because of these unresolved fears.

A second factor in the avoidance of ethnicity in the curricula of our nation's schools is the myth of the "melting pot." Teacher candidates across the United States, like millions of individuals in the general population, have been subjected to the American ideal and myth of the melting pot and have, therefore, largely ignored ethnicity and ethnic identification. The problem is that the myth of the melting pot has produced a society in general, and a teaching force particularly, that eschews ethnicity. Many teachers are therefore unprepared to use ethnicity—a critical aspect of the human condition—as a resource for fostering school success for a large segment of students for whom academic achievement has been elusive.

Israel Zangwill introduced the American ideal of the "melting pot" in his play of the same name. In this play, he expressed his hope for a world in which all ethnicity had melted away (Zangwill, 1909). When *The Melting Pot* opened in Washington, D.C. in 1909 it quickly became popular across the United States, a country to which immigrants had come and were still coming in masses. Zangwill (1909), speaking through David, the play's protagonist, explained the idea of the melting pot:

America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to—these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American. (p. 33)

As immigrants continued to come, they were encouraged by those already here to leave behind or forget about the "old country," with its distinctive language, customs, clothes, values, beliefs, foods, holidays, traditions, etc. Motivated by the ideal of the melting pot, and the not so subtle pressure from those who had already willingly entered the crucible, thousands of immigrants indeed, chose to leave their culture behind. In a sense, they chose to "lose" their ethnicity. For many, it was an additional price they paid to become Americans. Millions of pre-service and veteran teachers have already paid the price of giving up their ethnicity, and because ethnicity is ignored in schools, millions more African American males pay the price of their ethnicity in schools across the United States.

Pre-service teachers come to my classes enamored with the ideal of the melting pot, and speaking of the melting pot as a present reality. The melting pot is not a reality in the United

States of America. If a society values the unique cultures of all of its peoples, the melting down of cultures—figuratively or practically—should never be a goal towards which an individual or a society works. Rather than fear ethnicity and race, pre-service and veteran teachers of all hues should reject the myth of the melting pot and claim their ethnic histories. In so doing, they will begin to prepare themselves to assist African American male students in the exploration of their ethnic identity. We who care about the education of African American male students should insist on nothing less.

Ethnic Identity Exploration in Education

Given the psychological importance of ethnic identity and the academic achievement benefits of ethnic identity development, the ability to incorporate ethnic identity exploration into their curricula and pedagogy should be one of the minimal competencies that teachers should be required to demonstrate. To fill this curricular and pedagogical void, I developed the model of Ethnic Identity Exploration in Education. In this section, I will name and define each of the four dimensions of ethnic identity exploration in education and provide some examples of how each dimension might be implemented. In the *making connections with students' families about ethnic identity* dimension, teachers initiate and sustain a collaborative relationship with parents or primary caregivers to facilitate the healthy ethnic identity development of students. Just as teachers communicate with parents or primary caregivers by e-mail, telephone, post, PTA meetings, etc. to ensure positive cognitive, emotional, and social development of students, communication with primary caregivers regarding the development of ethnic identity is equally important. The dimension called, *making connections with students' families about ethnic identity*, provides opportunities for teachers to assure parents or primary caregivers of the school's intention to affirm, rather than deny or denigrate, the ethnicities of its students. Consistent with this dimension, teachers may also invite parents to participate in classroom instruction to contribute individual expertise, ethnic content knowledge, or ethnically specific learning activities.

Within the *engaging students in ethnic identity discourse* dimension, teachers lead students in discussions of issues that may be directly and indirectly associated with ethnicity and ethnic identity. Teachers can initiate these discussions by posing questions or by having students pose questions that will be answered collectively by the class. Whole class and small group discussions will help students share their thoughts and feelings in the company of others who may think and feel similarly, or who may have new insight regarding ethnicity-related questions. The ethnic identity related discourse covers a broad range of topics that are grade-level appropriate. At the elementary level, teachers should discuss and affirm the value of ethnic differences. Young learners will also benefit from discussions of ethnic and race permanence and celebrations associated with various ethnic groups. Teachers should also feel free to take cues from the learners regarding topics for discussions. Elementary learners think about race and ethnicity and want to discuss these topics; they just need permission to do so. For adolescents in the middle and high school grades, topics could include, but should not be limited to contributions of ethnic groups to United States society and the world, racism, ethnic stereotyping, feelings about African American group membership, social construction of ethnic group membership, impediments to healthy ethnic identity development, interracial, interethnic dating and marriage, and models of ethnic and racial identity development.

When teachers implement the *exploration of ethnic histories, traditions, and customs* dimension of ethnic identity exploration in education, they teach subject matter content in ways that allow students to learn the content while investigating their ethnic histories traditions and customs. For example, when students at the elementary level learn the concept of “family traditions,” African American students who celebrate Kwanzaa or Juneteenth are able to explore these traditions in depth and share their details with their classmates. In an economics class at the secondary level, the subject matter content will include American economic policies. Therefore, teachers could encourage students to investigate the historical contributions of African American economists to American economic policy. The work of Drs. Glenn C. Loury and Julianne Malveaux is exemplary and will figure prominently in any history of American economic policy. Implementing this dimension of ethnic identity exploration in education also means that teachers will use appropriate examples from the history, traditions, and customs of African American and other ethnic groups in their teaching in order to model the valuing of ethnicity and to encourage additional exploration of ethnic identity.

Facilitating meaningful relationships between students and role-models in their ethnic groups means that teachers design opportunities for students to meet individuals from their ethnic in-groups who are proud of their ethnicity and who are making a positive difference in their sphere of society. African American youth need to become acquainted with these types of role models who may be community activists, teachers, religious leaders, movie stars, national or international singers or dancers, or world famous politicians, for example. Students need to be aware that these role models work in many different professions, in all academic disciplines, and have varying levels of responsibility. African Americans play vital roles in societies around the world. This knowledge contributes to the development of healthy ethnic identities in at least two ways: first, students are able to associate excellence with their ethnic group and will feel positive about their African American ethnicity; second, students are likely to emulate these models of excellence, thus making similar contributions to their society or achieving at even higher levels. Teachers can facilitate these meaningful relationships between students and African American role models by inviting the individuals to make presentations during classroom instruction or by taking students on field trips to venues where they may interact with role models. When face-to-face meetings are not possible, vicarious interactions using books, films, videos, and other media can be substituted.

I began this introduction to the model of ethnic identity exploration in education by observing the national underachievement of African American male students. Contributing to this underachievement are the missed opportunities to educate teachers about the academic benefits of providing students with opportunities to explore their ethnicity within the school context. In spite of teachers’ fears of ethnicity and race, and America’s fascination with the “melting pot,” African American male students need a strong sense of themselves ethnically in order to resist ethnic and racial attacks effectively and to achieve at high levels academically. The four dimensions of the model of ethnic identity exploration in education provide teachers with a structure for assisting African American males in this critical developmental process while simultaneously helping to close the gap between African American male student achievement and excellence.

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