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Bridging Identities among Ethnic Minority Youth in Schools. ERIC Digest.

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Learning to bridge and negotiate contrasting cultural identities is a fundamental concern

for ethnic minority youth, especially since they often hold very different cultural values, communication styles, and interpersonal relationship norms (Carter, 1991) from those of the dominant white culture (native born Americans). For students of mixed race, developing this competency may be even more difficult because they are likely to embody cultural and social norms of more than one ethnic group. But, regardless of whether an individual claims a single or multiple ethnic heritage, many factors determine identity and sense of self: race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, generation, etc. It is essential for school professionals to recognize students who have problems with conflicting identities and to provide appropriate interventions, because unaddressed difficulties may evolve into significant mental health problems, such as psychopathology, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem; social and relational concerns; academic failure; and gang involvement (Inose & Yeh, 2001).

This digest examines the nature of multiple identities among ethnic minority youth and the ways they bridge competing and conflicting messages about cultural ways of being. It also discusses how the school environment contributes to student internalization of various identities and how practitioners may assist youth in developing positive multifaceted self-concepts that contribute to their social-emotional development and self-esteem in school.

THE ROLE OF THE DOMINANT CULTURE IN SCHOOLS

Youth from culturally diverse backgrounds often face contrasting notions of self because they must function in schools and educational systems that are organized around the values and goals of the "dominant culture." The dominant culture refers to that of the people who are either the greatest in number or who have the most political and economic power. In the United States, the dominant culture has been defined by white European Americans, specifically those very few who have a great amount of power and wealth (Helms, 1990). Students who are not from the dominant culture may be victim to unspoken yet powerful stereotypes and messages about their development and personal identity. Hence, they must learn to negotiate and bridge multiple, and often competing, identities in the schools.

Racial and ethnic minority students must learn to operate successfully in the dominant--white--system since they are evaluated based on its norms. This means that children are expected to develop a sense of autonomy and self-reliance and to accept that the individual is seen as the fundamental, or most important, unit of society (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Such understanding of the self as unique has clear implications for how children are treated in school. Generally speaking, students from collectivistic cultures (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991, for examples) must learn to be assertive, independent, and confident to succeed in schools, but must also be able to shift back to being relational, modest, passive, and family-oriented in at home. Moreover, home and school contexts are only two of the multiple settings in which students learn to operate

across cultures. They must also learn to shift and adapt to culture-based role expectation of peers, elders, significant others, etc. (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). Those who are unable to adapt to such competing and fluid role demands are often alienated from society.

Students from diverse cultural backgrounds learn to adapt to Western cultural norms in the school context in many ways. For example, teachers help them identify internal, personal attributes that make each student different and independent from the another. They emphasize positive attributes in students (intelligence, control, maturity, success) in order to build self-esteem. Teachers also help orient children to the future by asking them to consider the questions of what will be, or what they could become (future self). This developed sense of individuality, uniqueness, and freedom of choice can be seen in children as early as preschool (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

Minority group children have more difficulty internalizing these aspects of the dominant culture. They show poorer school achievement and have substantially higher dropout rates than majority children, at least in part because of the incongruent expectations, motives, social behaviors, language, and cognitive patterns that teachers and majority students may have.

IDENTITY FROM A NON-DOMINANT CULTURE

Student Attitudes Toward Achievement. Non-Western cultures may be characterized by a strong orientation to family and community (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yeh & Hwang, 2000). Motivation for achievement may come from a desire to gain access to others and to maintain affiliative ties with peers rather than from a desire to attain personal or individual goals.
To negotiate competing cultural norms and values, students must learn to be biculturally competent (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993), that is, they must integrate two cultures without feeling the tension between the two. According to the alternation model of bicultural competence (LaFromboise et al., 1993), individuals can adapt their behavior to a given social or cultural context without having to commit to a specific cultural identity. The ability to adjust across contexts and situations may include using different languages, as well as different problem-solving, coping, interpersonal, communication, and motivational styles of interaction.

A way for this orientation to be integrated into the curriculum would be for teachers to introduce more team approaches in the classroom so that children can work together and receive group rewards. Children might be given rewards that enable them to socialize with their peers, or an individualized activity can be paired with a group reward.

Counseling Concerns. Minority cultural values and beliefs, differences in behaviors, language, and worldview, and past power experiences with the dominant culture all

influence the success or failure in negotiating identities. For example, how discrepancies in one's sense of self are understood by minority individuals and what is seen as "normal" by the dominant culture may be quite different. The implications of this narrow view of "normality" are that minority individuals are often dismissed or pathologized in comparison to white school children, who are given more long-term support and guidance in schools. Further, the way that students' "adjustment"--how they bridge competing identities across settings and contexts--is evaluated in the schools may predetermine an erroneous negative assessment. For example, children may have identity conflicts and question the essence of who they are at school, but function appropriately and effectively at home or vice versa.

To help students make a positive social and cultural adjustment, school professionals need an understanding of the students' cultural influences and of the many ways that social and emotional problems which emerge in school are perceived, evaluated, and treated around the world (Lutz, 1985). Further, counselors should know the various ways that help is sought out when a problem arises within the family. While children may need help in negotiating their identity or in dealing with other problems, it is not usual for them to seek support services independently; they are referred by teachers and parents, if at all.

School personnel must recognize the level of ethnocentrism that influences their evaluation of children, and facilitate positive change in a child that does not involve stereotyping, overgeneralizing, or pathologizing behavior that is inconsistent with sanctioned dominant culture. They also need to realize that because ethnic minority youth must negotiate multiple identities, their youth selves are shifting and fluid, rather than static across home and school settings (Yeh, 2000). Finally, all school personnel must recognize that culture may impact learning style, and consider the social context in which the child is observed, rather than trying to understand behaviors as unequivocal indicators of a child's individual personality or character.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

A comprehensive multicultural education curriculum can provide students with rich and broad-based knowledge of the subjects covered, foster their understanding and appreciation of ethnic diversity, and promote positive interethnic relations. Multicultural educators need to tailor their curriculum to the developmental level and interests of children and to understand the different needs of majority and minority children. For example, in early childhood young children have concrete thinking and require experiential learning. Therefore, teachers can help them have personal experiences with other groups, share foods, and learn about different customs and holidays. Adolescents, with abstract thinking skills, can understand diversity through film, literature, and television, and assess how these media contribute to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.
Majority children are more likely to be ethnocentric and less aware of ethnic differences.

Thus they need more accurate information about other groups and an understanding of the value of diversity in enriching a society. Minority children are typically already familiar with the majority culture, while their own culture has been ignored or disparaged by the curriculum. A better understanding of the strengths and achievements of their own culture will increase their self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

Negotiating multiple, often contradictory, identities is a complex process for culturally diverse school age children. Social, cultural, and political factors unique to their backgrounds influence the process of identity development and the extent to which youth relate to values of the dominant and family cultures. Since identities are not solely dichotomous--home versus school--students may choose to embrace multiple ethnicities (identities) or may find safety in forming a cohesive self. Educators, therefore, should not normalize and pressure children to find a single identity. Rather, they need to acknowledge and accept multiple identities in students without prioritizing one over the other, and encourage students to appreciate their own cultural heritage and norms.

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