"Wearing a mask" vs. connecting identity with learning

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary insights regarding identity emphasize its situated, negotiated nature (i.e., identity is shaped by – and shapes in response – the contexts in which it is formed; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991) Recent work also suggests that this identity/context intersection holds powerful implications regarding engagement in learning (Brophy, 2008). This pair of qualitative studies drew from contemporary models connecting learning with identity (Study 1: *cultural modeling*, Lee, 2007 and *third-space/hybrid-identities*, Gutiérrez, 2008; Study 2: *Kids' business* inquiry projects, Fairbanks, 2000) to explore the nature and impact of such connections among disaffected ninth-grade English students at a high-needs school. Results demonstrate evidence of: (1) a significant connection between identity and learning; (2) students' negotiation of engaged patterns of participation; (3) the relevance of student voice to this process; and (4) the impact of connections between identity and learning on students' participation in, and affective response to, learning.

1. Introduction

The work of achieving a well-integrated identity has traditionally been considered a critical developmental task, one that is particularly salient for adolescents and that often preoccupies their energy and attention (Erikson, 1968). Recent socio-cultural and situated explorations of identity (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schachter, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978) have shed important light on this process by bringing attention to the intersection between the development of identity and the context of that development; that is, they have highlighted the interplay of personal, social, critical, and cultural situational factors in our understanding of identity. In contrast to conceiving of identity as an achieved understanding of the contours of self and as primarily a function of individual mental processes (as some have interpreted Erikson's work), these theorists conceive of identity as the pattern of practices and choices that emerge (and potentially shift) within the interaction of person and context. Identity can be seen therefore as a type of ongoing negotiation of participation, shaped by – and shaping in response – the context(s) in which it occurs.

Recent theory and research have also recognized this intersection between identity and context as a potentially significant aspect of student engagement and motivation. For example, Brophy (2008) reminded us that Dewey (1910) defined genuine interest in learning as actually an identification of the self with a concept or object, an identification that leads to self-initiated exploration (i.e., energized engagement) of that Concept or object. Similarly, Bergin (1999) suggested that individuals develop schemata associated with their identity and are likely to be more engaged with topics and experiences that resonate with that schema. Flum and Kaplan (2006) explained that students who intentionally examine the relevance and meaning of school content and learning with respect to their sense of who they are (or want to become) develop an exploratory orientation toward learning that involves actively seeking/processing information. Considering these insights, a vital next step in understanding student engagement and motivation is to discern both the nature and impact of such energizing connections between identity and school-based learning and how these connections might be reliably established and sustained amidst the daily demands of classroom life. The two complementary, exploratory, qualitative studies reported here drew from contemporary models connecting learning with student identity (Study 1: *cultural modeling*, Lee, 2007 and *third space/hybrid identities*, Gutiérrez, 2008; Study 2: *Kids' Business* inquiry projects, Fairbanks, 2000) to clarify the nature and impact of such connections among two diverse groups of primarily struggling high school students within the academic demands of their ninth-grade English class.

2. Emerging views of identity development

Traditional conceptions of identity development – exploring, identifying, and integrating seemingly disparate aspects of the self to arrive at a sense of personal continuity across time and context – have historically been attributed initially to Erikson (1968). Although a thorough understanding of Erikson's work reveals his attention to the cultural, historical, and institutional elements of identity formation, individual mental processes have often been given primacy in interpretations of his conception of identity development (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; see also Cote & Levine,

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1988; Erikson, 1968; Schachter, 2005). One of the most well established elaborations of Erikson's work, Marcia's (1980) identity status model, is based on the degree to which an individual explores, and commits to, particular identities. McAdams's life story model of identity (1996) asserted that individuals living in modern societies provide their lives with coherence and purpose by constructing evolving narratives of the self (i.e. life stories). Each of these perspectives regard identity development as a process of sorting out (achieving) a reasonably coherent, workable perspective on the self; each is also framed, to a great degree, as a primarily individual psychological process.

In an influential contribution to our understanding of development, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) highlighted the relevance of the multiple, embedded contexts in which individuals find themselves (e.g., home, family, peer groups, school, community, culture, history), each of which may wield a potent influence on development. Although identity has been conceptualized in a variety of ways (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), growing attention to these ecological complexities may provide the most "realistic and ecologically valid view" (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2000, p. 222). McCaslin (2004; 2009) captured the rich interplay of personal, social, and cultural influences on identity development in her model of *co-regulation of emergent identity* (p. 137). She suggested an ongoing reciprocal press among these three influences that together challenge, shape, and guide (i.e., co-regulate) identity.

Many contemporary models have emphasized this situated nature of identity, raising complex and significant issues. For example, Lave and Wenger's (1991) framework of identity drew from practice or activity theory to conceive of identity as an individual's pattern of choices or practices situated within particular contexts. According to these theorists, a range of potential participatory choices exists at any moment within any community; the term *identities-in-practice* refers to the patterns of participation individuals choose to adopt. Use of the term identities-in-practice rather than *identities* highlights the important contrast between, on the one hand, a conception of identity as a set of choices and practices co-constructed between an individual and a specific community, and, on the other hand, an achieved, relatively uniform sense of self.

In a similar, widely cited, contemporary understanding of identity, Dorothy Holland and her coauthors also highlighted the reciprocal interplay between identity and context (Holland et al., 1998). According to these theorists, the way individuals come to understand themselves is continually negotiated and co-constructed through what is made possible or necessary amid the daily practices, encounters, discourses, and struggles available to them within a particular context (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; Wortham, 2006). Holland and her colleagues have raised an important issue regarding context as the site of identity work when they refer to contexts as *figured worlds*. This term refers to the fact that contexts are not neutral places, but are *figured* or socially constructed with distinguishable, institutionally endorsed perspectives regarding expected/accepted types of characters, tasks, values, and styles of interacting (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Therefore, at any given moment, individuals have access to a variety of practices, some of which may be imposed; identity (i.e., identity-in-practice) can be understood as an ongoing positioning of self reflected in how individuals receive, resist, or revise those contextual affordances or constraints (Davies, 2000). It may be important therefore to consider identities as negotiated, fluid, and multiple, rather than achieved, unitary, or consistent.

3. Identities-in-practice within learning contexts

The concept of identities-in-practice characterizes learning as participation in a community of practice, involving not just local events of engagement but also the construction of identities in relation to the practices within those communities (Wenger, 1999). That is, to learn in any community means to become a particular person (i.e., select a particular pattern of participation) with respect to the possibilities enabled by that community. For example, by negotiating membership (receiving, resisting, or revising expectations) within a classroom, students are practicing a particular identity in that context (reflecting and/or refracting who they are expected to be, to match who they think they are or want to be in that particular setting). Moll (1990) reminded us that students' lives are full of rich, historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge, skills and resources – referred to as *funds-of-knowledge* – that can be drawn on for such negotiations. McCarthey and Moje (2002) describe this process as an attempt by students to create identities or stories that allow them to feel like they belong in their school setting; they "just want to be part of the story" (p. 232). The ability to craft such connections (i.e., develop a sense of belonging) wields a powerful, possibly essential influence on engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; Juvonen, 2006). Identity may therefore be manifested and engagement empowered as students craft an identity-in-practice in the classroom.

Given the nature and the value of such classroom identity work, it is important to consider relevant dimensions of the figured world of schools. Schools typically legitimize certain school practices while divesting others of status or approval (Bartlett & Holland, 2002; Hatt, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Wortham, 2006). Critical theorists have long urged educators to construct learning environments that are meaningful to students (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Greene, 1995). Failure to do so – which is all too common (Hargreaves, 1996; McDermott & Varenne, 1995) – silences student voices and alienates students from educational experiences (Moll, 1990). A gap therefore often exists between students' preferred choices or practices and school-based expectations; often it is this gap, rather than students' intelligence, skills, or abilities, that must be reconciled in order for them to succeed in school (Klos, 2006).

Thus, from an ecological, socio-cultural, situated, or figured world perspective, a student's negotiation of their identity-in-practice within the context of school (i.e., their participation, or how they choose to receive, resist, or revise contextual cues) is powerfully positioned to either constrain or nurture their engagement in learning. The cost is high when students have infrequent opportunities to harness what is important and powerful to them in order to negotiate meaningful participation in learning (Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006).

4. Supporting connections between identity and learning

Among motivation scholars, the late Brophy (2004, 2008) has played a major role in highlighting the intersection between students' identities and their learning experience as a particularly powerful site for student engagement. He pointed out that according to Dewey's (1910) notion of inquiry, it is when the public curriculum and the students' personal curriculum become intertwined that students find engagement worthwhile (see also Guthrie & Anderson, 1999). Similarly, Waterman (2004) reported that goal-oriented engagement is especially high when activities connect with an individual's identity or core sense of being. That is, the route to making the curriculum desirable, or most engaging, for students can be summarized in the formula: "It is desirable to act in accordance to one's personal identity" (Nisan, 1992, p. 133). This objective requires creating classroom cultures in which students discover who they are and negotiate connections between who they are and what they do in school. Flum and Kaplan (2006) suggested that teachers can support this process by dialoguing with students about the meaning of school learning,