Good education for all? Student race and identity development in the multicultural classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of ethnic identity in students' responses to a multicultural curriculum. Specifically, it tested group differences in the key premise of multicultural education, which is that learning about other groups affects students' identity formation and that this learning translates into skills critical to academic success, intergroup harmony, and promotion of democratic values. The results provided partial support of the hypothesis. Participating in a curriculum focusing on race and ethnicity yielded more benefits to White than non-White students, suggesting that Whites may be uniquely positioned to benefit from multiculturalism. Possible mechanisms underlying the different outcomes of multicultural education for various groups of students are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, the question of educating students from diverse cultural backgrounds has been highlighted in two contexts: the increasing rate at which our society is becoming racially and ethnically diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011) and the troubling persistence of the "achievement gap" that separates educational outcomes and career opportunities of White[1] and non-White students (Harris & Herington, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007; Zirkel, 2008). These developments coincide with 50 years of educational reform following the historical Brown vs. Board of Education decision. During this time, the end of educational segregation was followed by the establishment of diversity as a "compelling interest" in higher education (Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003), legitimizing multicultural education as a means of educational and social change. Yet some authors now warn of new forms of discrimination in integrated schools (Feagin & Barnett, 2005) and others document that multiculturalism benefits primarily White students (Bowman, 2009; Denson, 2009; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin 2002; Kuklinski, 2006). These competing interpretations of the legacy of Brown vs. Board of Education suggest the following questions: What does it mean to educate culturally diverse students in integrated classrooms? Do these different students receive the same, and equally valuable, education? And whose "compelling interest" does multicultural education serve?

To meaningfully address students' academic and social-developmental needs, it is important to clarify the connections between intra-personal, interpersonal, and institutional processes that are uniquely implicated in multicultural education (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008). Fundamentally, these connections center on the role of student ethnic and racial

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[1] The accepted racial designator typically uses a suffix "American" to describe Whites, for example, as White or European Americans. However, to accurately represent the diversity of the student sample in this study (and in many US institutions of higher learning), comprised in large part of immigrants and foreign nationals, only a racial designator White/non-White was used.

identity in learning. This paper seeks to understand how student identity develops as a function of both curricular changes that incorporate diverse perspectives into a curriculum ("classroom diversity") and through social interactions among diverse students on campuses ("interactional diversity") (Gurin et al., 2002). In addition, because identity functions differently for students identified as members of different groups, it explores whether and how these developmental processes differ among White and non-White students.

1.1. Conceptualizing race in multicultural education

Research on racial identity shows that Whites and non-Whites experience their group memberships differently: for Whites, their racial (and often, any other cultural identity) is typically much less salient and therefore, less developed as part of one's self concept, compared to non-Whites (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009). In fact, among the many privileges of being White is having the choice to ignore the important ways in which one's race structures the life opportunities and success of people (Rankin & Reason, 2005). For example, many White students believe that only minorities "have race" (Banks & Banks, 2010), while non-White students wonder at how little White students know about the effects of race in our culture (Henry, 2005). In addition, White identity development follows different models compared to the development of minority identities (Tatum, 1997; Zirkel, 2010).

Because of their differing points of view and the ways in which schools institutionalize race, White and non-White students may have very different educational experiences (Hurtado et al., 2008). Non-Whites experience their campuses as more racist (Rankin & Reason, 2005), tend to be more in favor of equal opportunity initiatives (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Syed, 2010), and those who perceive the school climate as hostile show poorer social and academic outcomes (Hurtado et al., 2008; Steele, 1997). In view of these differences, multicultural educators have called for the development of educational frameworks that meaningfully incorporate issues of diversity for students who occupy different social positions, identity statuses, and who may seek different goals.

1.2. The role of student identity in multicultural schools

The importance of examining schools as spaces in which students develop is underscored by current debates about accountability and reform aimed at reducing disparities in educational outcomes. The focus on identity as a process that shapes student academic achievement *and* school engagement, together with cognitive development and democratic attitudes, allows us to displace early conceptualizations of multiculturalism as a form of remedial education for minority students. By shifting how we view the process of learning, it establishes multicultural education not as an individual intervention but a social project designed to deliver "good education for all" (Zirkel, 2008).

1.2.1. Identity effects among non-White students
One of the original rationales for teaching multiculturalism is its hypothesized positive effect on academic outcomes of minority students. To help reduce the White–Black achievement gap, schools seek to engage minority students' ethnic and racial identities and reshape students' perceptions of school climate. The identity-engagement hypothesis is largely supported by research; when the school environment is viewed as supportive rather than contrary to minority students' experiences outside of the classroom, academic engagement increases (Tatum, 2004; Zirkel, 2008), as does the students' academic confidence (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Kohn-Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003).

What emerged in the first decade of multicultural research, however, was the finding that White students frequently benefit from multiculturalism in schools *as much or more* than their non-White counterparts (Bowman, 2009; Denson, 2009; Gurin et al., 2002; Kuklinski, 2006). This raises the following question: How does identity development promote educational benefits among White students who already feel connected to their school environments? And, what other mechanisms may be responsible for White students' gains?

1.2.2. Identity effects among White students
There are three possible mechanisms to explain White students' learning from multicultural education and why Whites may benefit to a greater degree than their non-White peers. First, multicultural curricula create important opportunities for intergroup education. The extensively tested contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011) specifies the beneficial effects of interacting with persons from different backgrounds as a road to cooperation and social tolerance. Because White students typically have less interethnic contact pre-college, they frequently reap the most benefits from the multicultural "acquaintance potential" made available by diverse schools (Sidanius, Levin, van Laar, & Sears, 2008). Research on asymmetrical contact describing contact between majority and minority groups further supports this notion. High status group members typically improve their intergroup attitudes as a result of contact with minorities, yet the resulting attitudes of the lower status group members may remain unchanged (Bikmen, 2011; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005).

Multicultural curricula may facilitate the development of those aspects of White identity that are aligned with the valuing of diversity and rejection of oppression, conceptualized as a "positive" or "power-cognizant" White identity (Goren & Plaut, 2012; Morrison, Plaut, & Ybarra, 2010; Plaut, Buffardi, Garnett, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011). Without diversity interventions, increased identification results typically in a "negative" or "prideful" White identity leading to hierarchy-enhancing attitudes, a color-blind ideology, individualistic rather than systemic conceptions of racism, and negative intergroup attitudes (Adams,