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Constructing Student Identity in Christian Schools

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Multicultural education in our pluralistic society causes teachers, administrators, and communities to consider how culture, identity, ethnicity, race, social class, sex, and gender affect the ways in which we interact within society, groups, in the roles we fill, and in our education system. In order to deconstruct how identity affects learning in the education system, it is essential to first explore how identity is constructed, school culture, and how student identity is incorporated or excluded from the curriculum and school culture. Cultural roots which historically constructed identity have become more difficult to excavate in our ever increasingly interconnected, globalized world. Therefore, teachers must be deliberate in providing enriching diverse curriculum in order for students to see themselves reflected and valued in our society.

Identity theory is essential for teachers to understand in order to ensure diverse groups of students with a strong sense of identity in a constant source rather than in constantly changing, worldly standards. Identity is formed reflexively in objectifying self in order to categorize, classify, and name self in relation to other social classifications. This is easily seen in school climates as students identify themselves based upon comparisons with others. Social identity theory is a metacognitive knowledge of belonging to a social category. This group holds common social identification by social comparisons of 'self/other' or 'in/out' groups. This self-categorization is formed by perceived similarities between self and group and the social comparison of selectively accentuating self/group from 'other' for self-enhancing outcomes.

While this phenomenon occurs in Christian schools, it is not in alignment with Christian doctrine. We are all parts that make up one body; the Body of Christ. While there are differences

and similarities, those differences and similarities do not unite, divide, or define us. It is the total body that unites and defines us. My personal history as a Christian has constructed my beliefs, values, and attitudes in my life, teaching, and application of learning. These beliefs are reflected in my rebuttals towards identity theory and social identity theory.

In identity theory categorization depends upon a named and classified world. The individual categorizes self as an occupant of a defined role and the defined expectations of the role in society. The culturally set standards and expectations of the role guide behavior and resources and the control of resources defines social structures. Identity theory is also in opposition to Christian doctrine as self is defined by doing, not being in Christ. There is nothing we can do; it has all been done. God does not define us by what we do. As a Christian educator, it is essential to help students remain in their identity in Christ rather than works.

In both social identity theory and identity theory an individual's view of self, self-categorization or role, is constructed by existing meanings in an already structured society (2000). Examining the self by employing both social identity theory and identity theory allows for a more general theory of self to be constructed (Stets & Burke, 2000). However, while utilizing both theories would provide a more encompassing sense of self based upon unifying characteristics in groups and the roles fulfilled in groups, identity remains constructed by worldly standards.

The major difference of the two theories is self-constructed group identity versus role-based identities. Those self-defined by role act to preserve meanings and expectations of the socially defined role. The individual has interrelatedness with others in counter roles resulting in an interconnected uniqueness. Therefore, the individual has their own perspective and negotiates

the terms of interaction with others in the group. When differentiated leadership roles, necessary to verify identity, are not negotiated the result is less satisfaction with the role and threat of leaving the role develops. When role identities are verified, a strong attachment to the role and group develops (2000). Therefore educators must ensure that they are creating a strong classroom community where all students feel connected, valued, and respected for their personal culture. Those self-defined by group-based identity or extreme concurrence, have uniform perception and action, which can lead to social movements. Relationships are parallel in uniformity of perception and action. Group-based identity functions as a collective of similar views and those who do not agree are identified as the 'out-group' (2000).

The issue with basing identity in role is that the self is valued upon doing and achieving to a socially constructed standard. When achievements are made and expectations met, then identity in a role is valued. However, if expectations are not met and result in failure, then identity in the role leaves the self not valued. Identity and value are then defined by our achievements and failures, not in our constant identity in Christ. Specifically in the school setting for students where social pressures and culturally differences are frequently encountered.

Stets and Burke recognize that individuals are at once in a role and in a social category. Role is based upon a role within a group while categories are based upon the group in relation to itself and other. "One always and simultaneously occupies a role and belongs to a group, so that role identities and social identities are always and simultaneously relevant to, and influential on, perceptions, affect, and behavior" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 228). Role identity cannot easily be separated from group identity, nor from the person identity because they are interrelated and

operate simultaneously. Stets & Burke suggest that "belonging and doing are both central features of one's identity" (2000, p. 234).

While as humans we do base our identities in the socially defined groups we belong to and the roles we fill within those groups, we as Christians must resist the worldly desire to base our identities in socially constructed values. We will always fall short by another group's standards and there will always be someone who can fulfill a role better. If we continue to teach our students that their identity resides in these socially constructed values passed down in our culture, they will constantly question their value and identity.

Both theories recognize that identity has no purpose without activation. "In identity theory, salience has been understood as the probability that an identity will be activated in a situation" and in social identity theory, salience "indicated the activation of an identity in a situation" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 229). "The activation of an identity in a situation allows individuals to accomplish their personal and/or social goals" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 230). The question is if an individual's position will activate one identity rather than another. In social identity theory depersonalization is an in-group member seeing oneself as a prototype of what represents the group, rather than a unique individual. Similarly, self-verification is the cognitive process in identity theory. Self-verification is seeing oneself embodying a role. When identity is activated, self-verification is seen in behaviors such as rolemaking as identity and is portrayed by actions (2000).

The self exists within society and is influenced by society because identity is based in both a social category and in role behavior. By performing a role well, self-esteem is increased by the self-verification that accompanies achievement. "People feel good about themselves when

they associate with particular groups, feel confident when enacting particular roles, and feel authentic when their person identities are verified" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 234).

We cannot continue to teach our students that identity is verified and valued by actions. Students are praised for their involvement with multiple extracurriculars, good grades, community service, and for who is able to function with the least amount of sleep. Our culture indoctrinates students into believing their identity and value is built upon their actions and achievements. Even in Christian schools we acknowledge students for honorary awards based on school spirit, grades, or popularity. These cultural practices remain in identity theory and social identity theory basing identity and self-worth in in/out groups and achievements. Where does this leave our students when they are not considered part of the in group or they do not achieve to the set standard? Where then do they place their value and identity?

We do, we love, and we act because we were first loved. By loving, our identity in Christ is activated. Moved by the Holy Spirit, we respond to God's love by loving others. Yet, our value remains in our identity as children of God, not in our actions. The issue remains with Stets and Burke's combination of basing identity in identity theory and social identity theory that identity is only verified and valued based upon constantly changing, worldly values.

Stets and Burke define an 'us/them' theory of 'otherness' and the power structures which accompany the culturally constructed categorizations. Personal identity, constructed from cultural roots, is lost as cultures merge and are affected by globalization, americanization, and gentrification. However, we have an innate human need to categorize, enabling us to make sense of various aspects in the world around us. As we try to identify ourselves by the groups to which we belong, the roles we fill, and the way we dress to fit those groups and roles, it is difficult, but

necessary for us to constantly remind ourselves and our students of where our true and only identity rests in Christ alone. Ecclesiastes chapters one, six versus one through two, seven and nine remind us that our identity is firmly grounded in Christ, not in earthly things or earthly knowledge and understanding. Everything is meaningless, including our labor or role (NIV, 2011). Therefore, if we as Christians base our identity and value in either social identity theory, identity theory, or the combination of both, we are not holding true to our identity in Christ.

In a Christian school we are able to help our students ground their identity in Christ by talking about how our identity in Christ affects our activated identity in social constructs such as the groups we belong to or the roles we fill within groups. Groups and roles will always maintain variants due to cultural differences which will never result in worldly unity. If we want our students to have a strong sense of self, then we must also address the greater context in which identity in the school is built and activated. While students may acknowledge their identity in Christ, they must learn socially acceptable behavior for their activated identity in Christ within the school and greater culture.

Before students understand how culture functions for various people in various establishments, they must be able to recognize cultural variants between groups of people, society's dominate culture, and within various social establishments in order to respond appropriately. Culture is how we interact with one another, is constructed by society, and transmitted from one generation to the next. Culture varies between groups and cultural diversity can either lead to cultural divides or an awareness and celebration of cultural uniqueness. As educators in a ever increasingly diverse world, we must establish culturally responsive teaching in our classrooms affirming the cultures of all students, expressing value in differences, and

reflecting the gamut of cultures in our curriculum (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013). Socially constructed cultures are practiced by groups of people who may self-identify or be identified by their ethnic group, social class, sex, gender, or combination of these categorizations. Membership in groups is based upon these various means for identification (2013).

As students begin to understand culture, cultural variants, and how culture is constructed, valued, and passed down the generations, they will begin to learn how to activate their identity in various culturally constructed situations. Kytile mentions, we must be aware of mindlessly supporting the superior status of the dominate group (Kytile, 1978). As role models and leaders, teachers must demonstrate, not simply tolerate differences between personal identities, and strive to understand and embrace differences. When we live our beliefs, the students will mimic our behavior.

As Christians we should teach our students to strive for cultural pluralism; a society allowing distinct cultures to exist and thrive without requiring assimilation into the dominate culture (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013). Cultural pluralism presents a way for unique groups to gain from one another while proudly maintaining culture and identity. This theory is in alignment with my teaching practice, which is based on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. We each come bearing various gifts, abilities, and experiences and when we celebrate these unique qualities by using them in combination with one another, we achieve something greater than we could have achieved on our own. This practice allows for all students to explore who they are in terms of their personal history and culture as we celebrate how each of us can add to the richness of our learning. An overarching rule in my globalized classroom includes not simply tolerance, but informed knowledge and acceptance of the unique differences among our diverse cultures.

Including student culture and student voice in class allows students to achieve by using their ways of knowing. Recognizing inequalities in the classroom and in our society as a whole, prompts teachers and students to think about social change. Gollnick and Chinn (2013) second this concept stating that, “achievement is improved when teachers help students interact with the academic content through discussion and authenticity, relating the content to students’ prior experiences and real-world applications”. Teachers must create safe learning climates for all students. Safe learning environments encourage students to development self-identity, share thoughts, and take risks. If students do not feel safe in their learning environment and are encountering harassment, exclusion, or abuse, they may stop attending school or lose focus due to the threatening distractions.

Gollnick and Chinn (2013), point out that the difference between home and school culture may cause dissonance for students and that to develop a supportive learning environment, the teacher must integrate the students’ cultures into the curriculum. As a result of my learning through multicultural studies it is even more important to me now that I develop a multicultural educational experience for my students. Our interconnected, globalized world and job market require culturally aware, empathetic employees. My students have little experiences in multicultural settings and the student population has little diversity. When “we seek out others for dialogue and understanding, rather than speak about and for them, we can begin to move from exercising power over others to sharing power with them” (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013, p 11). In order to change school culture, we must first understand the greater social context, in which a school exists. Teachers can no longer idly participate in an oppressive system, but instead must promote culturally responsive teaching methods for social justus and equality (Lynn et al, 2006).

In conclusion we as educators must fully be aware of the diverse cultures of our classrooms and how to incorporate socially empowering lessons for all students, instilling knowledge and acceptance for all cultures while maintaining a strong sense of identity.

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Appendix A

Lesson Plan - Multicultural Me

Modified from: Teaching Tolerance: A Project of The Southern Poverty Law Center. <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/my-multicultural-self>

- Topic: Identity & Culture
- Grade Level: 9-12
- Subject: Visual Arts (cross-curricular) | Ceramics

Objectives:

- Students will identify at least 5 facets of their multicultural selves
- Students will reflect on how any one identity facet shapes the way they view the world
- Students will understand the many reasons that miscommunication can occur
- Students will research a chosen country, reporting on all aspects of culture
- Students will identify a prominent historical, cultural, artistic practice or artist from their chosen country
- Students will identify a prominent contemporary, cultural artist from their chosen country
- Students will identify a prominent cultural aspect from their country that interests them
- Students will create a ceramic form, using the elements and principles of design, that is a social commentary unifying the historical artist, contemporary artist, and cultural aspect of their chosen country

Framework

Before endeavoring to develop cultural knowledge and awareness about others, students must first uncover and examine personal social and cultural identities. Guided self-reflection allows students to better understand how social group memberships inform who we are. This exercise is an important vehicle in any peer conflict mediation and helps students embrace the concept of being culturally responsive and culturally sensitive while maintaining their own identity.

Introduction

What is culture? It is a shared system of meanings, beliefs, values and behaviors through which we interpret our experiences. Culture is learned, collective and changes over time.

The following exercise explores the roots of cultural learning by naming aspects of identity important to each individual. It highlights the multiple dimensions of our identities and addresses the importance of self-identification. This exercise will also uncover what we allow to construct our identity instead of basing our identity solely in Christ.

Step One

The teacher should complete a handout in advance to serve as a model for students. Draw your multicultural self-components on the whiteboard. Example:

Mrs. Swenson

Christian – Teacher – Female – Caucasian – American

Share how each of your identity bubbles is a lens through which you see the world. Mrs. Swenson might share, for instance, that when she became a teacher she became stronger and more sensitive, stronger for being responsible for the learning and well being of students as well as knowing she would do anything to protect them. But she also became more sensitive to students learning to love a certain academic subject.

Step Two

Distribute a handout to each student and give the following directions: "Place your name in the center figure. Use the identity bubbles to name aspects of yourself that are important in defining who you are."

Allow students time to silently reflect on what they have written. Invite them to form pairs and share why the descriptors they chose are important to them. If time permits, invite pairs to introduce one another to the class. Form small groups around the same or similar descriptors, i.e., daughters, softball players, band member. Discuss similarities and differences among those of the same "group."

Step Three

Have students reflect on how each individual identity shapes the way they view and interact with the world. The teacher can use her own identity shells to illustrate this concept. Mrs. Swenson, for example, might share how being a teacher allows her to be a part of two worlds: as an educator who is a life-long learner and as a professional colleague.

When the teacher is sure that students understand this concept, discuss as a class or in small groups:

- How would you feel if someone ignored one of your multicultural identity bubbles?
- Can you see how ignoring one of your identity bubbles could cause miscommunication? Can anyone give an example?
- Do you have more than these 5 identities?
- If your 5 identity bubbles are communicating with a group of 5 others, how many identities are interacting? (30 minimum)

Set up the next step by sharing with students that we have many identities in our multicultural selves. Not being aware of our own or others' identities causes miscommunication.

Step Four

Our identities are NOT static. We are shaped and reshaped by what goes on around us and our identities constantly change as well. Give examples:

- A parent dies and this reshapes the way we see the world
- We fall in love and this reshapes the way we see the world
- We fall out of love and this reshapes the way we see the world
- We experience an act of violence and this reshapes the way we see the world

So, what we once knew to be true about our selves and others can change over time. For this reason, we should always try to suspend judgment, ask questions of others and talk with those different from us as much as possible.

Step Five

Students choose a continent and each student chooses a country from the class continent. Students are to research all aspects of historical and contemporary culture including, but not limited to: imperialism, language, traditions, becoming of age practices, holidays, clothing, food, wars, politics, philosophy, religion, migration, imports/exports, affects of globalization (historically and contemporary), inventions, famous people...

Students will be the expert on their country and share a slide show about their country

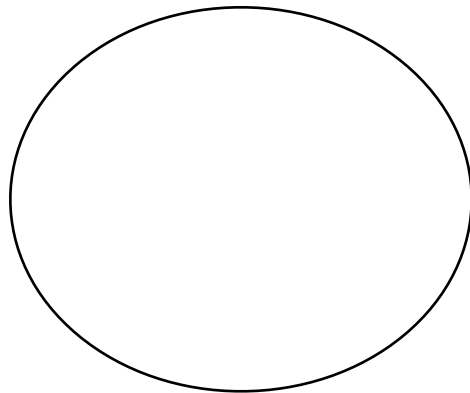
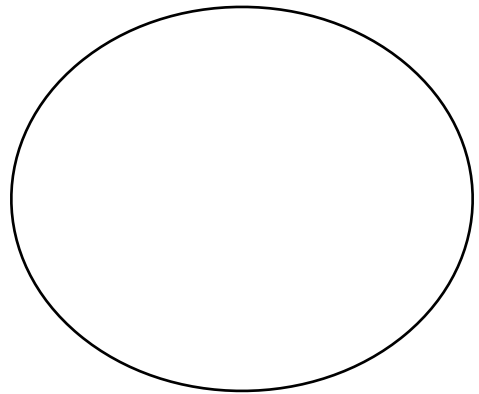
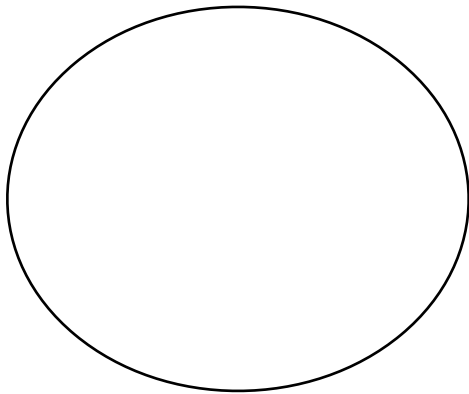
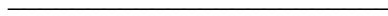
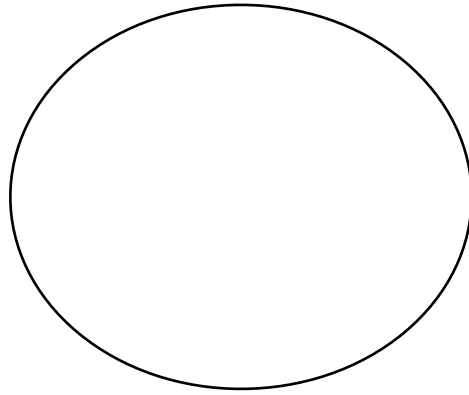
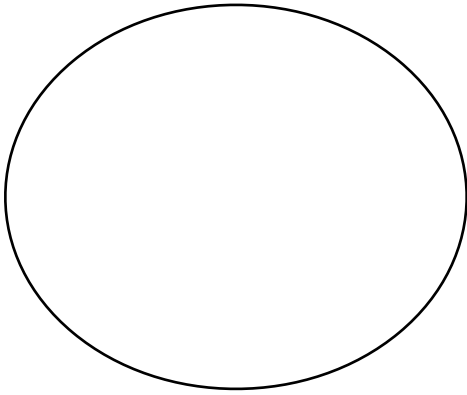
Step Six

Students identify a historical artistic practice or artist, a contemporary artist, and a social issue specific to their country that they can combine to create a social commentary, ceramic piece that ties all three aspects together.

Multicultural Me Worksheet

Name: _____

Place your name at the center and make a word web of five multicultural facets of your identity.



Appendix B

Final Report: Peer Review Participation with Author's Notes

1. My final report is an extended statement about my learning and application of identity theory in Christian education for both my instructor and my church community's adult and youth study groups.

2-3. While analyzing my second draft of my final report, I have found that while I am focused on identity theory, it is difficult to include all of the complex networks of culture that affect the development and activation of identity. This has caused me to broaden the theories which I am researching and reporting, but also focus in on what exactly is affecting identity. I am satisfied with the conclusions I have drawn on the development and activation of identity theory in Christian schools, but I need to include more details about how this theory was set into motion in my educational experience and how it will be put into action in my classroom today.

4. I have enlisted both a self evaluation and peer review for my final report. I will address the issues stated above. The peer review from a colleague in educational theory revealed that I needed to include more self-reflective experiences tying the theory back to classroom practice.

5. I am having trouble solidifying the content down to focus solely on identity theory and the affects developing and activating identity has in Christian schools without reaching to far into other educational theories.