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Identity Development within adolescents and how educators and parents can positively affect
this development

by

Charlotte Heim, Ryan Bruderie, Paige Block

Erik H. Erikson was a developmental psychologist who constructed a theory of the human life cycle. Erikson defined eight stages of human development within the life cycle. One of the most influential stages is stage 5, identity versus identity confusion. This “identity” stage is typically considered the adolescent stage, although identities can shift and grow as people encounter new challenges. Adolescence is defined as individuals between the ages of 12 – 24 years old. In this stage, the adolescent learns to be faithful or loyal to an ideology. A child's relationship with parents provides a base in which they can draw from to find various identities. In addition to parents, the primary social influence in this stage is peers. “An unfavorable balance leads to role confusion, symptoms to which are delinquency, cynicism, apathy, and an inability to settle on occupational identity” (Pool & Snarey, 2011). Erikson coined the term “identity crisis”, and believed it was one of the most important conflicts that all individuals must face.

James Marcia expanded upon Erikson’s work. According to Marcia, finding an identity depended upon committing to an identity. Marcia split Erikson’s work into two dimensions, crisis and commitment (Hall & Sears, 1997). Marcia developed an interview method to measure identity and four different identity statuses. The four status identifications looked at one’s occupation, sexuality, belief, and value system. He named these statuses diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Individuals in the diffusion stage have a low commitment status and low experience with crisis. These people tend to feel out of place in the world and do not actively search for an identity. Those in the foreclosure stage are committed to specific goals, values, and/or beliefs, and may not have experienced an identity crisis. Individuals in the moratorium stage may not have attempted any identity exploration. The moratorium stage

consists of individuals that are actively exploring various identities and have not yet made a commitment. Those in the moratorium stage could be considered in an “identity crisis”. Lastly, those in the achievement stage have gone through both a crisis and have formed commitments (Hall & Sears, 1997).

In addition to naming each identity stage, James Marcia studies how identity is formed. He proposed that personal identity was formed through individual experiences that had taken place in the here and now (Van der Gaag, M., Albers, C., & Kunnen, E. (2017). These emotional experiences and acts of exploration may have played an important role in developing personal identities. Much of the exploration came in the form of social interactions which then led to an individual to have a perception of themselves (Van der Gaag, M., Albers, C., & Kunnen, E. (2017). All of these interactions result in the individual either embracing or conflicting with their identity. These experiences then cause the individual to either affirm or re-evaluate their identities. In the study, the researchers looked at the role of emotional experiences in commitment development. The researchers focused on the positive and negative emotional experiences and how these were related to the changes in the level of commitment in adolescents and emerging adults. The sample size of the study consisted of 103 first-year psychology students in the Netherlands. The average age of the group was 19.1 years of age at the beginning of the study. Females made up 81% of the research base. The participants in the study were given a 6 point Likert scale to measure the amount of commitment as well as filling out experience reports weekly. If the participants failed to meet the requirements, they were dropped from the study. The students indicated on the weekly reports the emotions they had felt with the experience by rating them with a positive or negative emotion. The results of the study showed that both positive and negative emotions seemed to play a role in commitment development. A

majority of participants found that positive emotional experiences had a substantial impact on the level of commitment experienced. The study also found that negative experiences affected everyone differently. Negative emotions played a large role in changing the commitment level for some individuals and an insignificant role for others. For most individuals, emotional experiences seemed to have a stronger impact on commitment levels than exploration.

Understanding that emotional experiences play a large role in identity development, Rich and Schachter discussed identity formation within the education system in the journal article, "High School Identity Climate and Student Identity Development". The study explored in the journal article assumed that adolescents have a developmental identity need. The adolescent identity develops positively in a nurturing environment which could be in a school. School could be an important place to create this positive identity development. The study looked at three different aspects of identity development, a teacher's caring and effects on students' emerging identities, teachers as role models and their effects on students' emerging identities, and cultivating the whole student and the effects on student's emerging identities. The study involved 2787 students, 967 males, and 1820 females, from 152 classes across twenty-five high schools in Israel. The students were given an anonymous survey using a Likert scale to rate each of the aspects. The study found very little difference between male and female respondents. In grades 9-11, the results were also fairly uniform. Teachers as role models had the most favorable rating from the students studied within the identity development study. The students felt that this was a leading predictor to developing their identity. The study showed that 12th grade students were less likely to perceive teacher caring as a factor in identity development than the younger study participants. Teacher caring was also a factor but was perceived at a lower level. Teacher caring and school cultivating the whole student came in as a lesser factor although still in the moderate

level. This study suggests that teachers play a large role in adolescent identity development by being a role model themselves, and younger students responded to teachers who care. As educators, our focus is consistently on student behavior, while this study shows that our behavior has the largest effect on their identity development and emotional well-being. Teachers who care can also help younger students to have more positive emotional experiences in school and increase their commitment to school.

In addition to being a good role model, educators need to be able to identify various behaviors and connect those behaviors to the identity status individuals may currently experience. Arnett stated in his article that “adolescents’ identity status tends to be related to other aspects of their development” (McLead et al., 2016). Those who are in the “achievement” or “moratorium” categories tend to be more self-directed, cooperative, and good at problem-solving. Diffusion tends to be the least desirable category since it can predict later psychological problems such as lower self-esteem and self-control. In addition, the diffusion status is linked to high anxiety, apathy, and disconnected relationships with parents.

After identifying what identity status a student may be encountering, can any change be initiated to help students in the various categories move closer toward a mentally healthier status? The authors of *Promoting Identity Development in the Classroom: A New Role for Academic Faculty* conducted a study to explore the impact of a structured curricular intervention on the identity development of college students (Hall & Sears, 1997). As cited by Hall (1997), “studies have found that during the college years, a significant number of students reach achievement status on occupational and political issues, but regress from foreclosure to diffusion status on religious issues. The authors' study was made up of 42 undergraduate students, 27 of whom were female and 15 were male. During the experiment, both the experimental (8 males to 13 females) and

control (7 males to 14 females) groups were provided with the standard seminar curriculum that included communication skills, socioemotional development of students, challenges facing teachers, discipline and abuse issues, national reports and studies on school effectiveness, methods of instruction, diversity in the classroom, and personal and career goals (Hall & Sears, 1997). Those in the experimental group were assigned additional readings and discussions that focused on the four domains of identity development: occupational, political, religious, and interpersonal relationships. To measure the change, the authors used a pretest and posttest. The pretest consisted of a six-point Likert scale that covered 64 items to represent the four ideological and four interpersonal domains. After the curriculum intervention was administered over a semester, students took a posttest to measure the change. The changes in identity status were characterized as progressive, regressive, or neutral. The study results found that more than half, (11), of the experimental group made progressive change, one made a regressive change, and nine remained neutral. The control group recorded only three made progressive changes, three made regressive, and 15 remained neutral. This study provides support that the use of curricular intervention is a way that educators can positively impact identity development (Hall & Sears, 1997).

In addition to teachers, parents can have an even greater role in identity development. A study was conducted about "The Relationship Between Positive Parental Involvement and Identity Achievement During Adolescence." The study referenced Barber's (1997) model of parenting. Three dimensions are referenced for healthy development. The first dimension is called warmth. Warmth is a feeling that an individual is connected and significant to others. Another dimension deals with parental regulation of behavior called demandingness. This dimension is important for learning self-regulation. The third part of the model is concerned with

the facilitation of psychological autonomy. Parents must be responsive to the adolescents' need to become independent from their parents. Ideally, parents should provide enough structure that to allow adolescents to explore without reducing their ability to relate to the individual. Parental encouragement is vital for the autonomy dimension. The study focused on the interrelationship between these dimensions and measured parental knowledge of social and school-related activities as predictors of identity achievement. High parental awareness of adolescent behavior was hypothesized to be directly associated with identity achievement. The sample size was 293 sophomores and 719 seniors at a catholic school. Data was collected by a survey. The results were as expected. Identity achievement was significantly and positively correlated with parental support, social monitoring, and school monitoring for both males and females. Contrary to what many believe, grade in school was not a significant factor in identity development. Parental emotional support was the strongest correlated factor for adolescent identity development. The second highest correlation to identity development was social monitoring, then school monitoring. Gender was not significant in relation to identity development. The results of this study show that parental knowledge of daily activities and parental emotional support are vital to teenagers. This confirms James Marcia's work that identity is developed through emotional experiences, and emotional support can help kids move through the identity stages unscathed. Today's world suggests that adolescents should have more autonomy and are capable of life decisions independently. This study shows that adolescents need parental support and input. Students that are detached from parents do not achieve a strong sense of identity, in fact, it can be detrimental to development.

According to Jeffrey Arnett's chapter "Identity Development from Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood: What We Know and (Especially) Don't Know," it was not until the early

twentieth century that young people have had the opportunity to decide for themselves what their beliefs are including their religious and political beliefs; as well as what their social attitudes are (McLead et al., 2016). As educators, the knowledge that we have gained throughout this review process has helped us identify students that are in various identity stages. Learning of these various identity statuses will help us match tasks to their skill level. This information will help us to better serve our students by giving them the tools to understand what stage they are facing and guide them through any challenges. Further studies that define specific guidelines to identify student needs could be very helpful. Adolescent identity development is a modern concept that we can apply to the world around us and is a concept that still needs a lot of studying.

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