

# Promoting Students' Identity Exploration and Engagement in Disadvantaged Contexts

Jessica Hadid<sup>1</sup>, Michael W. Smith, Avi Kaplan  
Temple University

## INTRODUCTION TO CASE STUDY

Student identity systems play a central role in shaping academic motivation. They also imply the intersection and complex contextual interplay of students' personal and social characteristics. Understanding how identity systems interact with curricula to trigger exploration and facilitate adaptive change around task engagement is particularly important in disadvantaged communities because education can act as a lever for change. In this case study we employ the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI)<sup>1</sup>—an integrative theoretical model describing contextual and dynamic emergence of identity, motivation, and actions—and the Press for Exploration approach to identity-focused instruction<sup>2</sup> to ask:

*How do honors students from a disadvantaged community explore their identities and engage academically in the context of PRESS activities?*

## THE DYNAMIC SYSTEMS MODEL OF ROLE IDENTITY (DSMRI)



DSMRI framework selected to accommodate the complex and situated nature of student motivation

### The PRESS for Exploration Approach:

- Promotes students' perceived self-relevance
- Triggers students' identity exploration
- Facilitates students' sense of safety
- Scaffolds identity exploration strategies

## METHODS

**Case selection:** Two 12th grade students were purposefully selected for their divergent levels of identity integration and component alignment.

**Data:** Biweekly exploratory journal responses to PRESS prompts; online chat logs; observation field notes; student performance

**Analysis:** Case analysis employed the DSMRI Coding and Analysis manual.

The student with **greater alignment** among identity components showed **more consistent task engagement and persistence** in the face of academic struggle, compared to the student with less identity alignment.



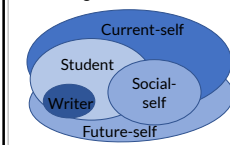
<sup>1</sup>jessica.hadid@temple.edu

## RESULTS

**Joaquin:** More integrated identity system facilitated strong sense of agency, aiding his perseverance through an exceptionally challenging virtual school year, while also bringing about the emergence of a writer role identity.

**Coleson:** More fragmented identity system impeded academic growth. However, his common goal across role identities to retain authentic sense of self served to hold him steady through the exceptional challenges of and online learning year.

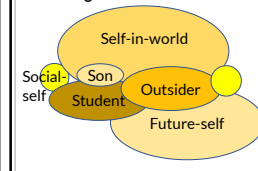
### More integrated role identities



### Joaquin:

"My motivation will never disappear as I will always have the motivation to do better because I was made this way and I am just a hard worker" (Journal Activity 11).

### Less integrated role identities



### Coleson:

"My motivation in this class is very low for me because I dont think I belong here...there is a lot of stress weighing me down for where I just want to give up" (Journal Activity 11).

## DISCUSSION

Our research helps lay groundwork for further inquiry into the complex identity systems of students in disadvantaged communities. Specifically, further research should examine students' different baseline levels of role integration to identify and understand formative elements of such states earlier in students' education trajectory (e.g., middle school). Why, for example, were Joaquin's *in-* and *out-of-school* identities more integrated than were Coleson's by the start of 12th grade?

## REFERENCES

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