

HEALTHY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT INCLUDES ETHNICITY AND RACE



This brief is intended for educators, school leaders, and district decision-makers who work with adolescents and care about how to promote healthy identity development among students.

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This brief addresses how Educational Psychology can support equitable learning experiences through positive identity development.

Policies that ban conversations about race in schools are harmful to students and educators.^{1,2} Students of color (e.g., Black, Latine, Native American, and Asian American people who have been historically marginalized) are ostracized when schools neglect race and equity. Students with racial privilege (i.e., White students) also lose out on critical identity development, which includes understanding their race, ethnicity, and culture.³ Furthermore, ethnic-racial identity has been recognized as a meaningful component of identity development with implications for wellbeing and positive mental, social, and academic outcomes.⁴ Thus, conversations about race and identity ought to be encouraged rather than avoided. This brief offers practical ways to approach identity development in school and ways for educators to support critical discussions in classrooms.



KEY DEFINITIONS & FINDINGS

- **Race** is a socially defined concept used to designate a portion, or subdivision, of the human population with common physical characteristics or ancestry.
- **Racism** is a form of prejudice that assumes that the members of racial categories have distinctive characteristics and that these differences result in some racial groups being inferior or superior to others. Racism leads to interpersonal, institutional, and systemic disparities in opportunities.
- **Ethnic-Racial Identity** is awareness of one's ethnic cultural heritage alongside the understanding of ways in which socially constructed race categories unfairly advantage or disadvantage one's assigned racial group. Though race and ethnicity are different, they are intertwined in one's identity.⁵
- **Racial Privilege** is a built-in advantage, separate from one's level of income or effort.⁶ White people have greater access to power and resources than people of color in the same situation. Privilege applies to any social identity (e.g., gender, religion), not just race.
- **Race Evasiveness** is believing race does not matter; avoidance of discussing or acknowledging race, which reinforces erasure of people of color's experience.⁷
- **White Fragility or White Defensiveness** is a response among White people during conversations about race, racism, or privilege, e.g., assuming personal accusation when a fact of racism is mentioned.^{8,9}

Developing ethnic-racial identity promotes:

- Healthy identity development and wellbeing^{10,11}
- Positive mental health (e.g., lower depressive symptoms)¹²
- Academic achievement¹³
- Critical consciousness¹⁴
- Social justice action^{15,16,17}
- Overall wellbeing (e.g., positive social functioning, self-esteem, prosocial skills)¹⁸

One promising practice to deconstruct racialized norms is to **promote ethnic-racial identity development** among all people. Research on ethnic-racial identity has become prevalent in recent decades.¹⁹

Research suggests that:

- Ethnic-racial identity development has been associated with positive student-teacher relationships,²⁰ sense of belonging,²¹ agency,²² institutional trust/fairness,²³ and race-consciousness.²⁴
- School environments where culture, ethnicity, and race are discussed, explored, and celebrated²⁵ enable students to be clear about their ethnic-racial identity and position/responsibility in society.²⁶
- Furthermore, for White students in particular, the extent to which they understand the centrality of race in people's lived experiences impacts how they interact with people of color.²⁷

SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Evidence-based classroom practices that can support ethnic-racial identity for all students include: (1) embracing conversations about race, inequity, and social justice, (2) prioritizing time for community building and social skill development, and (3) supporting educators' ethnic-racial identity development.

1. Embrace conversations about race, inequity, and social justice: Youth, including White youth, talk about race and racial issues at a young age, whether or not these are discussed in school or at home.^{28,29} Apart from family ethnic socialization,^{30,31} other influences include peers,³² neighborhood factors,³³ and social contexts.³⁴ Schools can support ethnic-racial identity development by:

- providing racially diverse books and learning materials;
- having explicit conversations about different racialized experiences and about racial and social justice;
- discussing current events such as protests for racial equity, the Black Lives Matter movement, and Supreme Court decisions that protect civil rights;
- carrying out racial equity audits of curricula and equal access to educational opportunities;³⁵ and
- using evidence-based structured curricula, such as The Identity Project^{36,37} and ethnic studies programs.^{38,39}

Adolescents themselves report feeling more supported at school when they have opportunities to learn about their own ethnic-racial identity⁴⁰ and intentionally discuss socio-historical and current forms of racism.⁴¹

2. Prioritize time for community-building and social emotional skill development:

Evidence about the long-term positive benefits of social emotional skills is clear.^{42,43} Moreover, transformative social emotional learning, which emphasizes culture, identity, agency, belonging, and engagement for justice-oriented citizenship,⁴⁴ identifies skills that are inclusive and culturally responsive. Schools can:

- cultivate positive student-teacher relationships⁴⁵ and positive attitudes toward diversity (i.e., cultural pluralism) for all school members, especially among educators;
- provide explicit instruction in social awareness, self-awareness, and relationship-building skills.⁴⁶ This is beneficial for students overall and supports ethnic-racial identity development; and
- support community-building and social emotional skills by weaving practice into academic instruction and stand-alone activities.

Many schools have adopted restorative practices as a schoolwide ethos for building community, strengthening relationships, and increasing equity.⁴⁷

3. Support educators' ethnic-racial identity development: Given the pervasive negative messages in our media and society, it is crucial for educators, most of whom are White, to (a) learn to recognize and confront racial discrimination and (b) promote positive social messages about people of color. Discussing race is often met with contention, such as race-evasiveness,⁴⁸ White fragility and defensiveness,^{49,50} or racial resentment. These can be challenging conversations to shift beliefs and behaviors, especially for those who have a stake in racial privilege, deny systemic oppression, or identify as non-racist but have yet to grapple with their own racial identity. To address these challenges, schools and districts can:

- offer professional development for educators' ethnic-racial identity development that have shown positive outcomes;⁵¹
- practice recurring courageous conversations⁵² or shared reading/discussion groups focused on racial equity.^{53,54,55} Allow time for adult reflection and growth; and
- prioritize ethnic-racial identity development with (a) safe, clear discussion guidelines, (b) opportunities for self-exploration, (c) developmental models/ frameworks to situate one's own racial identity processes (e.g., Cross, 1995 or Helms, 2020), and (d) empowerment for educators as change agents.⁵⁶

Despite discomfort that people may experience when discussing race and privilege, experts agree that supported experiences discussing racial issues can assuage guilt and lead to resolution.^{57,58} It will take time and consistent practice to get to the point where these difficult conversations are the norm.

GAPS AND LIMITATIONS

While much research has rightfully focused on adolescents of historically marginalized racial backgrounds,^{59,60,61} scholars have also emphasized the importance of ethnic-racial identity development among White youth^{62,63,64} and in school contexts.^{65,66,67} Current political trends discourage and, in several cases, have led to bans on talking about race in schools for fear of White students feeling guilty.^{68,69} However, neglecting the salience of ethnic-racial identity in White populations perpetuates the White-centered social narrative that contributes to the false social hierarchy of race in which Whiteness is a standard.^{70,71,72} Moreover, neglecting students' ethnic-racial identity or avoiding conversations about racial discrimination and racial assets (e.g., cultivation of joy and resilience) pushes out students of color and neglects their racialized lived experiences.^{73,74}

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