

Negotiating Contradictions in Identity Development: Re-engaging Youth in Alternative School Contexts

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Abstract: Alternative schools often provide innovative learning contexts that are different from mainstream schooling, allowing youth on the margins of education to re-engage in school and develop their academic identities. This identity development often becomes a process of negotiating the contradictions between the multiple identities that youth develop across time and space. This paper explores a case study of one youth during his first year attending an alternative high school.

Keywords: Identity, alternative education, case study, at-risk, secondary education

Major issues addressed

Alternative schools provide innovative learning contexts that are different from mainstream schooling, allowing youth who are labeled “at risk” new opportunities for success and identity development (Tierney, 2018). Through a case study, this paper explores the complexities of identity development for youth on the margins of education as they re-narrate their educational identities (Tierney, 2016).

Potential significance

Building upon identity literature (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Nasir, 2012), this paper encourages educators and scholars to consider the ways that schools could help youth not only negotiate their in-school identities, but also the ways in which they make sense of the multiple identities, contradictions, and tensions that they embody across the contexts of their lives (Dreier, 2009). For youth experiencing risk and on the margins of education, it may be important to specifically help them negotiate the contradictions in their lives.

Theoretical approaches

Sociocultural literature has explored how identities, forms of participation, and, ultimately, academic trajectories are negotiated, produced, and reproduced through classroom discourse, school archetypes, and cultures and communities across settings or worlds of social practice (Dreier, 2009; Holland et al., 1998; Nasir, 2012).

Methodological approaches

The data for this paper is from an ethnographic longitudinal study over the course of one academic year of youth attending two alternative high schools. The data in this paper is from a case study of DJ, a young man at one of the schools: Pathways (Note: all names are pseudonyms). Youth at Pathways were put into leadership positions at the district-run wilderness camp, where students led groups of sixth graders who visited the camp. DJ was interviewed throughout the school year and was observed in multiple school classes and contexts. In both interviews and observations, a combination of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and theoretical constructs were used to create codes and coding categories. Analysis also included member check and analysis of specific discourse events.

Major findings: The two DJs

In his first interview, DJ talked about how important Pathways High School had been to him and how his past year had been a process of wrestling with “the two DJs”. One DJ was who he was before he came to Pathways, spending time with his friends from his old school, smoking weed, drinking alcohol, and stealing. The other DJ was “the strong confident man I want to be”, who he was at Pathways. “One DJ wants to be tough and like I’m a stereotypical guy and male. The other one... [is] kind of soft and sensitive” (DJ Interview, 3/11/15). DJ talked about how the influence of his two friends, who he referred to as his “brothers”, was one of the reasons he chose to attend Pathways, looking to escape their negative influence. However, DJ also reflected on how his old friends were more than just a negative influence: “My friends are, I guess, I see them as my brothers, but they’re such a bad influence on me. I want them to support me with what I’m doing now. It wasn’t easy to take this step to go to a new school and be away from them” (DJ Interview, 10/20/14). In this quote and throughout his interviews, DJ captured the complexity and contradictions of trying to redefine who he was while maintaining old friendships that he cherished, yet also recognizing the negative influence they had on him. There was a noticeable difference

between the norms, practices, and resources of the contexts in DJ's life. The contradiction that DJ experienced was feeling torn between the resources that he had known at his old school and with his old friends and the resources available to him at Pathways. Dreier (2009) discussed that a person's conception of himself or herself includes an understanding of how they participate in multiple contexts and practices and that it also included coming to terms with different possibilities, relationships, and conflicts. Viewed this way, DJ's experiences trying to figure out his relationships with his friends, was the process of developing a conception of himself.

While DJ developed an identity as a leader and school community member, he also continued to wrestle with how to blend his new identity with his relationships with his old friends. In the spring he shared how he was spending more time with his old friends, smoking weed and drinking again.

Jimmy [DJ's teacher] tells me all the time, 'Why do you hang out with those guys?' Dude you need to understand... I have the ability to say no, but in those times I don't say no, it's on me not them. You have to realize these are my brothers since seventh grade... It's a bond. It's a connection. When it's us three together, we are always talking about old memories. I think about old memories and what we did... I will never forget those guys no matter what happens, no matter what people say, 'They are a bad influence on you.' You can't forget your roots. If it wasn't for them, those mistakes that I made with them, Pathways would've never happened for me (DJ Interview, 5/7/15).

In his quote, DJ identified the challenge of redefining one's identity. Identity development and identity renegotiation is not a solitary act. It is also not only an interaction between an individual and their localized environment. Instead, it is a complex web of interactions with the people and environments in one's life and the histories that are shared with others and that have helped develop one's identity (Holland et al., 1998). Throughout the first semester at Pathways, DJ sought to redefine his identity, not forgetting his past, but choosing Pathways DJ over the person he saw himself becoming at his previous school and around his old friends. In his second semester, DJ negotiated what it meant to blend aspects of the two DJs, figuring out how to be the person he wanted to be in all settings of his life. In essence, as DJ tried to negotiate the contradictions and tensions in his life, he sought to make Pathways and his friends an additive thing, where they all existed in his life instead of a replacement. Though DJ returned to smoking weed and drinking alcohol, his process was one in which he had solidified his identity at Pathways and then sought ways to integrate it with the old DJ, trying to no longer see himself as different people in different settings. DJ's drug and alcohol use demonstrate how identity development is not just a process of youth interacting with identity resources and redefining who they are in school, but also youth negotiating the contradictions they see in their lives. As DJ developed his identity in the alternative schools, part of his process was negotiating contradictions that existed within his identities and within his vision of school. DJ could not just take on a new identity and leave the old one behind – he developed his new identity, but then had to negotiate how it fit in with the entirety of his life, including any contradictions that existed between his new identity and his old friends and routines.

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