

# **Identity Work in the Classroom**

*Successful Learning  
in Urban Schools*

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Foreword by Theresa Perry



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## Introduction

Policies are, in part, discourses—values, practices, ways of talking and acting—that shape consciousness and produce social identities.

—P. Lipman (2011, p. 11)

Failure hangs in the air, its potency so great that it has begun to cloud the vision of even those who claim a sense of clarity when it comes to issues of teaching and learning. Educational reformers have been at work for more than 2 centuries, and most recently their focus has turned to urban schools and systems. Current models favor choice, corporate management, and rigid accountability regimes (Apple, 2001). Many policymakers and administrators have taken a get-tough approach in the battle to improve students' and schools' progress, and the index for performance most often applied is standardized assessment. Despite the many different approaches, strategies aimed at improving schools in urban districts have yielded very few successes for the majority of students. The consequences are severe; although the threats of withdrawn funding due to failure to make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) have loosened with the arrival of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers, the pressure faced by city schools and districts has continued to grow.

Educators regularly ask why students are failing at such high rates and why the large achievement gap between students in urban school districts and their peers in suburban and private schools persists. This line of inquiry often leads to theories about the culture produced by poverty, families' values regarding education, and students' capacities for learning. But I believe we are asking the wrong questions. Rather than asking why students are failing, we should look at the *construction* of success and failure in our schools. Rather than students failing or teachers failing students, it might be the very reforms designed to improve student achievement that are setting schools up for failure. Varenne and McDermott (1999) investigate the discourse around schooling in America and argue that categorizing success and failure "can [n]ever capture the good sense of what children do. They directly conspire to prevent all of us from understanding the conditions within which the child's life is constructed" (p. 3).

Underlying reforms to date has been an unspoken and paternalistic assumption that neither administrators nor teachers in inner-city schools are knowledgeable or talented enough to successfully run these systems. Neither students nor their parents are viewed as having an important perspective to offer in terms of what changes could be made to support students' needs and improve engagement. Often there is a misconception that urban students are not as capable and their families are not as invested in education as their White and middle-class peers. Whether this logic leads to asserting more and more control over administrators and school staff or to creating the rationale to dismantle the public school system (Lipman, 2011), the effect is the same: the lives and educational needs of students go ignored.

A general distrust of teachers' professional ability and students' intellectual acumen has led to increasingly prescriptive reforms that leave very little space for students and teachers to know one another beyond a superficial level. While there has been an admission that the rigid and top-down nature of reforms of the past decade has depressed instruction rather than elevating it, the implementation of recent policies seem to be trending in the same direction. So, in the place of strict pacing guides, we now have a Common Core that suggests standards and goals rather than content and pedagogy. In either case, the context and pressure of such mandates stifles the development of deep relationships. Proponents of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) may imagine the possibility for more innovation and increased opportunity for teacher-designed curricula, but the rush to assess teachers' and students' progress with these newly designed curricular materials before they are aligned with new assessments constrains teachers' ability—to design instruction based on students' backgrounds, interests, and needs—in familiar ways. These pressures can be overwhelming for teachers and often impede their ability to engage in critical processes for learning: building relationships, listening, taking an inquiry stance, and making school relevant to students' lives. One preservice teacher expressed her concerns about prioritizing the expectations set forth by her teacher education program and those practices required by the school district. She posed the following question in a focus group comprised of other preservice teachers in her cohort:

They keep telling you, you should do this, you should do this. How do teachers actually . . . do all that stuff at once? How [do] you actually cover the material you need to, and make it exciting and teach for understanding and be culturally sensitive, and you know, encourage children, validate children's own experiences and all this stuff? I don't understand how anyone gets anything done. There's too much stuff to think about. (Quoted in Schultz, Jones-Walker, & Chikkatur, 2008, p. 156)

The need to negotiate an array of changing mandates that come from district, state, and increasingly federal policy initiatives makes the already challenging work of a teacher seem impossible. If a teacher is led to believe that any departure from new curricular adoptions will jeopardize students' ability to demonstrate proficiency on Common Core tasks and Common Core assessments, then teachers will likely forgo what they understand to be good teaching because it appears incompatible with required mandates and allotment of instructional time. Dedicating class time to learning about students' home lives or adopting alternative classroom structures or curricula that have previously been shown to increase student engagement may seem like too great a risk. Some teachers have the latitude to reteach a lesson, supplement district materials, or substitute an alternative instructional plan, but many do not. Teachers who have autonomy typically demonstrate success in making learning gains, which are reflected in standardized test scores and a variety of other measures. These teachers tend to succeed because they are confident about their teaching decisions and instructional practices, and they often subvert the required mandates (Jones-Walker, 2008).

Logically, we should examine the pedagogy of teachers who have met success and encourage other teachers to adopt these approaches, rather than make exceptions for a few teachers and increase the likelihood that they will close their doors in the interest of protecting students' education. Students are performing well when instructed by teachers who have autonomy, in part because of the talent and commitment of these educators, but also because these teachers can bring their whole selves and their professional judgments to the classroom. As a result of recent changes in educational systems, it has become increasingly difficult for teachers to get to know their students as learners (and as people in the world) and then make instructional decisions based on their own background and knowledge and the academic and social experiences of their students.

It has long since been established that to be an effective teacher, one must individualize instruction (Cuban, 1986; Edmonds, 1979; Gutierrez, 1992); however, current policies leave no room for individualization, despite our nation's rhetorical commitment to leave none of our children behind. Reformers are now focused on developing rigorous curricula that are aligned to the CCSS and building new tasks (or activities) to assess the degree to which students have mastered these standards. No sooner were these standards adopted with the intention of breathing life, variety, and breadth back into the curriculum than they became the new tool of accountability and evaluation of teachers. It is challenging for a teacher to familiarize herself with a new set of standards, align a curriculum to the CCSS, think about the best assessment strategies, and innovate in ways that will speak to the interests of learners. The approach taken in many states raises questions about implementation because the rollout, assessment, and accountability

too closely mirror the pitfalls of NCLB. With this pressure, many teachers will be forced into focusing on coverage (so that students are afforded equal access to curricula) rather than designing for the conditions that would afford mastery of content. In truth, some students need more time, some must be retaught, some require a different strategy in order to understand a concept, and still others must see how lessons connect them as a person to the larger world.

This book reminds us that we must take into account the social identities of the learner (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender) in order to produce successful outcomes for students. In addition, teachers must reflect upon their own identities and beliefs because pedagogical decisions flow directly from belief systems formed in large part through early life experiences. The case has been made for the inextricable link between identity and learning (Drake, Spillane, & Hufferd-Ackles, 2001; Jones-Walker, 2008; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Wortham, 2006). Identity construction refers to the ways in which an individual's experiences, social group membership, and position within social contexts together inform how a person thinks about and represents him- or herself. The dialogic nature of identity-making means that not only does how a person self-identifies inform his way of being but the interactions with others and the ways in which he is perceived by others will play a part in his conception and definition of self (Gee, 2004; McCarthy, 2001). Identity development is therefore a phenomenological process (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).

This book outlines how schools can be a critical site for the positive construction of identities, as well as a critical first step to improvement in learning and more expansive educational and professional opportunities. My aim is to broaden the ways we think about identity construction and make the variety of sites and multiple levels of identity-work more visible. There are daily choices that teachers, students, parents, and school officials make that are connected to the roles that these individuals occupy and the contexts that they shape. Through these daily decisions—coming to school, resisting a policy, and creating classroom discourse—people are contributing to the identity-making of individuals and institutions.

### **DEFINING IDENTITY**

Although definitions of identity are frequently contested, I borrow Levinson and Holland's (1996) framing, which views it as a dialogic process, one that is constituted in practice through interactions between institutions and people. This framing, which highlights the fluid, context-dependent, temporal, and overlapping nature of identity construction, improves when merged with critical social theories that posit that a consistent sense of self persists when practiced and enacted across contexts (Essed & Goldberg,

2002). In negotiating two discrete frameworks (cultural production and critical social theories of race) that are admittedly in tension, I propose a conceptualization of identity that is at once micro and macro, structural and cultural, material and ideological, ascribed and self-ascribed. Too often, models of identity consider that we must focus on large-scale structures or person-to-person exchanges rather than taking into account how microlevel interactions are informed by larger sociohistorical models and act together to inform individuals and the spaces they inhabit. In the descriptions of classroom interactions and school-level practices in the latter half of this chapter, identity-work encompasses these dualities, which are often set as opposing poles on a continuum.

Throughout the book, I refer to this process as “identity-making” or “identity-work.” The features or key aspects of identity-making apply to the work of the teacher and the learner and include the activities that appear in Table 1.1. While it is essential to provide the constitutive elements of identity-work, it is a complex process rather than a set of discrete outcomes; therefore, the sum of its parts does not necessarily add up to the whole.

This book provides a window into how teaching and learning can look when educators are committed to knowing themselves and their students in spite of rigid district, state, or federal policies. Reflecting on their own identities and beliefs can prove to be enlightening to teachers in terms of their pedagogical approaches, as these decisions are informed by early life experiences. Interactions with students can influence teachers, but more significant is the influence on teachers’ identities and the practice of engaging in structured conversations with colleagues. In the current context of urban schools, this approach is difficult, and occasionally impossible.

Two teachers, Dr. Ellen Clay and Ms. Andrea Carter provide the central examples in this book. (Names of all teachers and students used in this book are pseudonyms, except for Ellen.) I selected their schools as research sites because one mirrored the district demographics and the other was more diverse, better resourced, more autonomous than other district schools, and served a higher proportion of middle- and upper-middle-class students despite the fact that there were only five city blocks between them. In many ways it was the educators rather than the schools who captured my attention because of their interest in exploring identity and reflecting on their practice. Each teacher was asked to invite other colleagues to participate in a study of teacher and student identities through a cross-school study group. Ellen and Andrea’s own credentials and effectiveness—reinforced by the high standardized test scores of their students—provided them far more flexibility and autonomy than most teachers in urban school districts.

Not all teachers have the freedom Andrea and Ellen do, and standardized test scores should not be the only criterion used to determine whether teachers gain the freedom to modify curricula in order to meet students’ needs. This yardstick requires exceptional educators; unfortunately, good

Table 1.1. *Aspects of Identity Work*

Student Identity-Making	Teacher Identity-Making
Discussing one's background and beliefs with teachers and student colleagues	Discussing one's background and beliefs with students and colleagues
Talking about how experiences (background) shape beliefs, attitudes toward schooling, and stance as a learner	Talking about how experiences (background) shape beliefs, teaching philosophy, teaching practice
Participating in conversations about social identities (race, class, gender, nationality, religion) and societal structures	Facilitating conversations about social identities and societal structures
Examining one's positionality within the classroom, school community, home community and larger world	Examining one's positionality within the classroom, school community, and larger world
Making your interests, perspectives and needs known in ways that might inform your learning experiences	Exploring students' interests, beliefs, and experiences in order to shape the curriculum and to make it more dynamic
Drawing connections between academic work and events and activities outside of school	Connecting academic content to events and intellectual work that happen outside of school
Reflecting on interactions, actions, and choices in relation to the experiences and circumstances of others	Reflecting on interactions, actions, and choices in relation to the experiences and circumstances of others

teachers, or those who are developing their instructional practice, are rarely afforded the conditions in which to become excellent and achieve the established goals. Despite the fact that the focal teachers are more credentialed, effective (evidenced by a range of measures) and agentive than the average teacher, they are illustrative of opportunities and challenges represented in classroom-, school-, and district-based identity-work.

Even when qualified and committed teachers are allowed to pursue an alternative approach to meeting mandated curriculum standards, and even when they are able to recognize that their identities and those of their students are of consequence, identity-work can be challenging. The incidents, interactions, and curricular choices that follow are presented in order

to describe the type of identity-work that can occur in classrooms when teachers are given instructional freedom but also how complicated and uncomfortable this work can be. When we turn our gaze toward unpacking student–teacher interactions and the construction of identities in the context of learning, exquisite moments move to the background and tricky, tension-filled ones take center stage. The stories in this book reveal the difficult nature of engaging those issues related to social identity that I argue must be attended to if we want to improve student performance. The reality is that in the current educational context, progress requires an exceptional teacher who will willingly open up the classroom as a place to interrogate the roles that race, gender, class, nationality, and religion play in the process of teaching and learning.

Given that identity-work is challenging, it is critical that the policies we create support successful approaches rather than force teachers to work around the system by ignoring or resisting mandates. We must design reforms that support creative instruction because identifying and responding to the needs of students in urban schools has been shown to be the lynchpin of success (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This step is critical if we are to retain good teachers, if we hope to see increases in student learning, and particularly if our goal is to make large-scale improvements that are sustained over time. Who teachers are—their backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs—is central to the project, not alone but in relation to and in interaction with the experiences, backgrounds, and identities of the students they teach.

## THE STUDY

Driven by an interest in the experiences of teachers and students in urban schools, I conducted a critical ethnography based on two classrooms in neighboring K–8 schools. I was able to immerse myself in the classrooms, communities, professional development sessions, school assemblies, and, on occasion, fieldtrips. After spending approximately 200 hours as a participant observer, I made connections between teachers' goals and practices and could determine the sense their students made of the interactions and circulating discourses in each context. Life history interviews conducted with six teachers allowed me to trace teachers' identities to their beliefs and demonstrate how these belief systems informed their instructional goals and decisions.

Through observations, artifact collection, student and teacher interviews, and focus groups, I was able to uncover constraints and opportunities resulting from interactions between students and teachers in classrooms in a large urban school district. My goal for this book is to answer the call made by Varenne and McDermott (1999) to expose critical work that makes meaning of individuals' daily lives and that can inform our work