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# Identity Development to Support Disenfranchised Student Engagement

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Working amid pandemic related constraints presents teachers with complex issues around student engagement. Problems like inadequate internet access, competing home responsibilities, and trauma may be more pronounced among disenfranchised students (Darmody et al., 2021). Alongside these issues are long-standing literacy gaps oriented along socioeconomic strata (Burriss, et al., 2019), suggesting pandemic-related issues hurt disenfranchised student engagement disproportionately partly because they compound existing challenges. One approach to tackling engagement issues is to facilitate identity development through writing, aligning students' *in-school* and *out-of-school* notions of self. This article presents an approach that has met with success.

A student's *system of identities* (i.e., an individual's dynamic, situation-specific "chorus" of self-definitions and self-perceptions) plays an important role in shaping engagement. In part, systems of identities impact motivation through situational effects on cognition. Specifically, the elements and circumstances of a "place" (e.g., the physical and positional features of a classroom) affect what knowledge—within one's repertoire of prior knowledge—becomes accessible (Oyserman, 2015). Individuals experience their actions (e.g., engaging or withdrawing from a task) along a spectrum from congruent with their salient identity to incongruent (Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). When minimal overlap exists between what stimuli resonate with a student's *in-* and *out-of-school* identity (i.e.,

incongruence), it is more difficult for the student to pursue academic goals because they view success as misaligned with their self-definition.

Disenfranchised students often experience less choice and reduced sense of control in classrooms, limiting their capacity to recognize and employ personal agency (Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). Believing they do not possess resources to confront tasks, students may choose to avoid them. Even if they confront the task, lack of congruence between identities renders them more likely to perceive their efforts as neither relevant nor meaningful. In short, students' actions and behaviors (e.g., seeking help when confused) closely connect to how they define and perceive themselves in the situation. Whether a student sees themselves as a "skilled writer" or "deficient reader" while in English class, has long- and short-term performance implications. This suggests that identity development can—and perhaps should—be considered a form of classroom currency, particularly by teachers of disenfranchised students.

Curriculum designers and educators can address reduced engagement by supporting students' identity development, moving them toward the congruence associated with increased motivation. Classrooms serving students with low academic belonging are well suited to this endeavor because such students often struggle with writing fluency, inhibiting work output, and intake of text-based information. This is because composing written discourse *about* their reading content is a fundamental avenue for

working through comprehension struggles. The phrase “write to discover” likely resonates with educators. It suggests that writing is more than a simple act of retelling. Writing can facilitate an exploratory “working through” of meanings in which the writer emerges with deeper conceptual understanding. What is unique about students' writing in the quest to explore identities is that, although the content is conceptually complex, and therefore presents articulation challenges that promote growth, it is content about which the student holds expertise. Because students are the utmost authority on their own identity journey, they possess a sense of content area competence rarely felt by academically alienated individuals. This confers a sense of authority, while also building writing capacity, thereby supporting engagement.

### **A Possible Model**

Fostering identity development through written discourse can take a variety of forms; this article presents one. First, I describe the setting for which I created and implemented the program, then the conceptual framework that informed its design, along with the program's basic structure. Next, I discuss my analytical approach to program assessment and my findings, and finish by examining why the strategies worked.

The identity development program described is currently in its second year of implementation. It is set within two (11th and 12th grade) opt-in honors English courses at a minority-dominant public high school in North Philadelphia serving a student body designated 100% “economically disadvantaged.” The first year was delivered via an online platform due to pandemic constraints, while the current year has so far taken place in a face-to-face setting. The course's primary

curriculum teaches students the tenets of argumentative writing, preparing them for the rigors of college level content. A typical class involves students reading an article pertinent to the unit's essential question, intermittently addressing a series of prompts, and drafting an essay in response to the reading. The identity development program was purposefully integrated within this existing curricular structure, and intentionally employs many of the same elements (e.g., semantic scales). While a standalone implementation is possible, it is less ideal. Integrating the program into students' existing curricula is more likely to bolster engagement by establishing task-relevance and continuity (Kaplan et al., 2014).

My aim was to facilitate identity development to increase congruence between students' perceived *in-* and *out-of-school* selves. I used the PRESS for Exploration model (Kaplan, et al., 2019) to inform design. The PRESS model stipulates four principles to support identity development: 1) promoting students' perceived self-relevance for tasks, 2) facilitating students' sense of safety in the setting, 3) triggering students' identity exploration, and 4) providing scaffolded strategies for that exploration. Previous interventions have used the model (see Granit-Dgani, et al., 2011; Sanai et al., 2016) to good effect, but this is its first application among majority-disenfranchised students, rendering it a working model.

The program consists of a series of biweekly journal activities (JAs) that are conceptually and topically connected to the in-place curriculum. Activities span the entire school year, becoming integral to students' writing practice. The JAs are reflective in nature; often introduce a theoretical lens through which students view their actions, behaviors, and self-perceptions; and encourage student writing

that is conceptually complex, albeit stylistically informal. JAs often include group discussion before or after the student writing portion, eliciting organic conversation around students' ideas of who they are, who they hope to become—or avoid becoming—and how they might enact such desires. Although discussions are conceived of and launched by the instructor, they often transition to student-centered discourse that proceeds in unforeseen but productive directions.

To assess program effectiveness, I conducted a comparative case study that examined two students with notably different levels of engagement. I used a theoretical framework called the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI; Kaplan & Garner, 2017) to analyze the degree and nature of students' development and its impact on classroom behaviors. The DSMRI applies a complex systems approach that accounts for a wide array of person-centered and contextual inputs (e.g., personal dispositions, constraints and affordances of the setting). This approach assumes that the identity system components (ontological and epistemic beliefs; purpose and goals; self-perceptions and self-definitions; and perceived action possibilities), which inform a student's motivation, are interdependent elements that give rise to a nonlinear development process. In this view, a single element cannot effectively be observed in isolation from its counterparts (Kaplan et al., 2019). Because the DSMRI accounts for this organismic quality of identity and motivational systems, I selected it to guide my coding and analysis of the primary data: students' written discourse in response to JA prompts and discussions occurring over one school year.

Case study findings suggest that the student exhibiting comprehensive alignment among his role identity components also

demonstrated greater task engagement and persistence, paired with notable identity exploration. The student exhibiting fragmented identity components demonstrated inconsistent engagement and minimal exploration. These findings are in keeping with the tenets of Oyserman's identity-based motivation theory and uphold earlier findings (2015). Qualitative analysis also points to consistent levels of deeper and more authentic engagement during JA writing compared to general curriculum writing.

Two additional measures indicate program success. To examine program effectiveness more broadly—focusing on classwide engagement—I conducted regular classroom observations to record when and to what degree students were task-engaged. Detailed fieldnotes, taken two to three times weekly throughout each term, consistently show increased engagement during JA sessions for both the online and face-to-face implementation when compared to general curricula engagement. Further, students were asked to self-report their level of in-class motivation on a scale from 1-7 (1=low; 7=high) at the beginning and end of year one. Mean scores for juniors increased from 2.94 to 5.11 and for seniors from 3.4 to 4.93.

This information, paired with results from an exit survey at the close of year one, in which I solicited student feedback, suggests that the JA program both helped maintain engagement during online learning and increased students' sense that the learning was relevant to their lives. For example, one student noted that the JAs “allowed me to reflect on myself a bit, which I don't get to do very often in school.” This increase in motivation is somewhat surprising. For context, among a sample of 482 students surveyed during the pandemic, most reported the online format to be less enjoyable, less interesting, and less solicitous of attention and effort (Garris

& Fleck, 2020). Although the identity development program described here cannot lay sole claim to increasing motivation, it seems to have played a notable role.

### **Discussion of Results**

Given the program's success, it is important to ask: *Why does it work?* Understanding this is crucial in successfully adapting and integrating identity development activities within other ELA curricula. While Oyserman's theory and the PRESS principles help explain this success, considering why the program works at a more concrete level is worth examining.

A key component of students' engagement is the value they place on tasks (Wigfield et al., 2017). Positioning the student as the primary subject of their own investigation, as is done across the JAs, enhances students' sense of task value while simultaneously supporting their sense of competence. Reinforcing this, many of the JAs help students conceive of and formulate ideas around their "hoped-for" selves. This integration of students' "possible selves" with their more general self-concept helps them act on internally derived goals, aligning their in-the-moment decision-making with their long-term intentions (Markus & Nurius, 1986). When a JA asked students to review how they described their "hoped-for self" in an earlier activity, one student responded: "Now that I look at what I wrote I'm not really satisfied...it's more of what I want than how I would get there." The student then examines possible behaviors and actions to support their plan, specifying an intention to "learn as much as I can from school like finance, reading, writing, social science" as a means to achieve their "hoped-for self." This exemplifies the process of students assigning value to their academic efforts in response to visualizing their futures.

Also affecting readiness to engage is students' sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Master, et al., 2016). Centering the student's own development within the academic task, as is done throughout the JAs, conveys a sense of importance to students about who they are, and who they want to become. Embedded within this message of importance is a confirmation to students that they *belong* in the learning community, that in fact it was built partly in response to their existence within it. This sense of being integral to the social and intellectual space of the classroom helps satisfy students' basic need for relatedness, contributing to their motivation and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, the knowledge that teachers gain as they read students' JA responses and listen to their discussions supports tailoring of content to student interests and needs and facilitates stronger teacher-to-student connections. Each supports students' sense of belonging.

Helping students develop congruence among their *in-* and *out-of-school* identity systems is a practice that works. It builds student agency and has the potential to increase classroom engagement—a possible game-changer for disenfranchised students. While guiding students through a focused study of themselves is not among the CCSS in ELA, it fits nicely within them. Integrating identity work into ELA curricula fosters students' sense of relevance, belonging, and competence, while also increasing their literacy capacity and engagement. These are key steps toward establishing students' agency and general wellbeing.

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