Promoting ethnic identity development while teaching subject matter content: A model of ethnic identity exploration in education

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers promote ethnic identity exploration while teaching subject matter content.
- Parents collaborate with teachers to promote ethnic identity exploration in school.
- Students discuss ethnic identity and related concepts within the school context.
- Teachers report that promoting ethnic identity exploration is a part of their job.
- Social justice nature of Ethnic Identity Exploration in Education.

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ABSTRACT

This grounded theory study was conducted to investigate how two veteran social studies teachers, one African American and one Japanese American, incorporated opportunities for students to explore their ethnicity while learning subject matter content. Four themes emerged that form the basis of a model that provides teachers with strategies for assisting students as they learn about their ethnic groups through existing subject matter curricula. These data, and teachers' reports of sustained student engagement when exploration of cultural heritage was incorporated into the curriculum, provide warrant for including instruction in ethnic identity exploration in teacher preparation programs.

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1. Introduction

Rachon, the son of one of my colleagues came home from middle school with the following note from his teacher:

"Dear Mrs. Jones, today Rachon told me that he did not want to be African American. He also said he did not want his curly hair. He said he wished that he were White like Billy. Please talk with Rachon about being African American."

Rachon's teacher knew that Rachon was struggling with his ethnic identity, and she did the best she could with the knowledge that she had. Like many teachers, she had neither the curricular nor

pedagogical tools to support Rachon in his ethnic identity exploration. Some middle and high school students who express the desire voiced by Rachon may display other behaviors that signal the exploration stage of ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1989). For example, one of the teachers in the present study revealed that high school students of color often complained that they were "always" learning about Europeans, but that they were "never" taught anything about their own ethnic groups. The desire of these high school students to learn about their ethnic groups is consistent with the exploration stage of ethnic identity development (Phinney & Ong, 2007). At different stages of ethnic identity development, it is not unusual for students to need support understanding ethnicity and their ethnic identity development. Issues related to ethnic identity exploration and development emerge for adolescents regularly within the school context (Banks, 1994; Gonzalez, 2009; Huang & Stormshak, 2011). This study was designed to investigate how teachers promoted ethnic identity exploration in education,

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and what forms would curricula and pedagogies take if teachers provided students with opportunities to explore their ethnic identity in conjunction with learning subject matter content.

1.1. The problem

The problem highlighted by the examples above is that pre-service teachers in the United States are not prepared by their teacher education programs to assist adolescent students in the process of ethnic identity exploration. What we know about the teaching force in the United States suggests that this problem is endemic: A majority of the teachers are White, middle class women (Loewus, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2000); many pre-service teachers hold stereotypic beliefs about children in ethnic groups different from themselves (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007). Some teachers also hold prejudices and may discriminate against students. In their study of middle school teachers' implicit attitudes toward culturally diverse students, Kumar, Karabenick, and Burgoon (2014) found that White teachers also preferred to teach White children.

Contributing to the problem of pre-service teachers being underprepared to assist students in the exploration of their ethnicity is their lack of knowledge of ethnic identity development theory and its application in the learning process. Teacher education students are introduced to human developmental processes relevant to classroom learning in the educational psychology course (Peterson, Clark, & Dickson, 1990). Peterson and her colleagues have identified the discipline of educational psychology as "a foundation in teacher education" (Peterson et al., 1990, p. 322). However, ethnic identity developmental theory is nearly absent from educational psychology texts that typically include "foundational" developmental theories such as social, physical, cognitive, and moral development, that are important to classroom learning. Although the six most popular educational psychology textbooks include detailed discussions of cognitive, moral, and social developmental theories and their application to instruction and learning (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013; Ormrod, 2014; Santrock, 2011; Slavin, 2012; Sternberg & Williams, 2010; Woolfolk, 2013), none provide discussions of ethnic identity development theory and its application to teaching and learning.

1.2. Implications for students and teachers

Understanding ethnic identity is important for adolescents 1) to serve as a buffering mechanism from attacks on ethnic identity (e.g., see Romero, Edwards, Fryberg, & Orduña, 2014; Torres & Ong, 2014 [United States], Costigan, Koryzma, Hua, & Chance, 2010 [Canada], and (Stuart & Jose, 2014 [New Zealand]), 2) to make informed ethnic identity decisions and to make connections to their ethnic groups (Phinney & Ong, 2007), and 3) to know how their ethnic groups have contributed significantly to the very societies that devalue them (Bulman, 2017; Dasstagir, 2017; Druzin, 2018; Whittaker, 2018). Ignoring ethnic identity within the context of teacher preparation will have consequences for both students and teachers. Present and future generations of children of color may continue to eschew their ethnic groups because knowledge related to their ethnic groups is ignored or denigrated in school (Branch, 2004). Ethnically irrelevant teaching, teaching that assumes Whiteness as normative and ethnic groups as irrelevant, will likely continue to be a deterrent to learning for boys and girls for whom ethnicity is salient, and for whom nothing is taught about them in school. As more children become disengaged from learning, they are likely to add to the 3,000,000 plus students who dropout nationally, as reported by Education Week on its website on 1 January 2014. If the lack of preparation in ethnic identity

development is left uncorrected, future teachers will join the ranks of more than 1,649,000 middle and high school teachers who are underprepared (Campbell & Jeffries, 2017; Gay, 2010a; Mader, 2015; Merryfield, 2000) to respond appropriately to high school students and middle school adolescents like Rachon, who need to understand their ethnic identity.

1.3. Ethnic identity and ethnic identity exploration defined

Ethnic identity is difficult to define because some scholars conflate racial identity and ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), while others understand ethnic identity and racial identity to be separate constructs (Helms, 2007). Some scholars recognize that *ethnic identity* signals a commitment to a cultural group, and that ethnicity refers to cultural practices such as "customs, language, and values" of a group (Helms, 2007, p. 236). Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) prefer the term Ethnic Racial Identity and insist that, "racial identity and ethnic identity measures were not designed to be exclusively racial or ethnic" (p. 23). Umaña-Taylor et al. also cite considerable overlap when measuring the components of ethnic identity and racial identity, and they say that the distinctions between the two may be "outdated" (Umaña-Taylor, 2014, p. 23).

An Ethnic group is defined here as a cultural kinship group with which one chooses to identify (Helms, 2007). Ethnic group identification signifies a commitment to an ethnic group and is characterized by a shared sense of belonging to this group in which members share values, beliefs, and behaviors (Helms, 2007; Phinney, 1992; Yoo & Lee, 2008). The present research focused on *exploration*, a significant component of the ethnic identity development process (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The teachers in this study provided opportunities for exploration for the purpose of positioning students to make an *informed* commitment to an ethnic group.

E*xploration* has been understood to mean the extent to which one has thought about or explored the meaning of ethnic group membership (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014); *exploration* can involve searching out information about one's ethnic group (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). In their review of studies on the development of Ethnic Racial Identity, Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) found that both an increase in levels of independence and exposure to discrimination and heterogeneous groups may be catalysts for exploration in adolescents. They also found weightier levels of exploration in young adulthood (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

1.4. The importance of ethnic identity development to teacher education

The successful resolution of ethnic identity conflict is important to psychological well-being and healthy personal functioning (Erikson, 1968; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Adolescence is a period of life rich for identity development. The World Health Organization (2013) defines an adolescent as one between the ages of 10 and 19. Erikson (1968) believed that identity formation was a fundamental task beginning during adolescence.

Investigations of ethnic identity among various ethnic groups have revealed significant connections between ethnic identity, psychological well-being, and school success (Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006). Kiang and colleagues found that strong ethnic identification is correlated with higher levels of psychological well-being (Kiang et al., 2006). Ethnic identification provides psychological insulation that is necessary for one's emotional and psychological protection (Mossakowski, 2003; Telzer, Vazquez, & Heidie, 2009; Wong et al., 2003; Yoo & Lee, 2008). Learning is facilitated when students are made

comfortable psychologically by clarified ethnic and racial identities and are not preoccupied with feelings of intellectual incompetence fueled by racial and ethnic stereotypes (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; DeSocio & Hootman, 2004; Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007; Steele, 1997). Psychologists have also found ethnic identity to be directly related to school success factors (Branch, 2011; Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2008). Chavous et al. (2003) found ethnic identification among African American high school students to be associated with high school completion and college enrollment.

Many studies investigate the relationship between ethnic identity and academic achievement. Miller-Cotto and Byrnes (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 47 studies in which they focused on the association of Ethnic Racial Identity (ERI) with academic achievement. They included only studies that included at least one of five dimensions of ERI: Centrality, Positive Ethnic-Racial Affect, Public Regard, Exploration, and Resolution or Identity Achievement (Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2016). They found that the effect of ERI on academic achievement was small but positive for African American and White students and that exploration, positive feelings about one's ethnic group, and identity achievement were positively associated with academic achievement (Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2016).

Teacher preparation programs routinely require pre-service teachers to study the cognitive, physical, moral, social, personality, and language development of children (see Ormrod, 2014). I argue that ethnicity is common to the human condition and that a teacher's knowledge of ethnic identity development processes is as important to their student's school success as is the teacher's knowledge of cognitive, physical, moral, social, personality, and language developmental processes. Teacher educators have recognized the importance of clarified ethnic and racial identities and they affirm the importance of teachers being prepared to assist students in this critical developmental process (Banks, 1994; Gay, 1985). Gay (1978) has identified interpersonal ethnic conflict within the school context as indicative of students' internal struggles with ethnic identity and personal worth. Because ethnic identity issues are present within the school context, she believes it is incumbent upon teachers to provide curricular and instructional interventions (Gay, 1978; 1985). Banks (1994) has theorized that helping students of all ethnic groups clarify their ethnicity, among other identifications, is a critical role for schools as they socialize students for citizenship. He has stated, "An individual can attain a healthy and reflective national identification only when he or she has acquired a healthy and reflective ethnic identification" (Banks, 1994, p. 58). Okagaki (2001) has identified the home, the school, and children's social identities as three major factors to be considered in understanding the academic achievement of students of color. Okagaki believes that the social identity of ethnicity must be investigated along with academic identity in order for teachers and researchers to have a clear understanding of the academic achievement of students of color.

Investigating the social identity of ethnicity has also been important. Santoro and Allard (2005) investigated the social identities of ethnicity and social class among teacher education students in Australia, where 'ethnicity' is used to signal and define individuals who are not of Anglo-Australian heritage (Santoro & Allard, 2005). These researchers wanted to know how pre-service teachers interacted with students who were ethnically different from the pre-service teachers themselves. The researchers used focus groups and individual interviews to gather data from eight teacher education students before they started teaching, during the student teaching portion of their program, and following their three-week student teaching experience. The student teachers also kept journals of their experiences. All of the pre-service teachers in the study were Anglo-Australian except one female who was an Australian of Sri Lankan heritage. Regarding ethnicity, Santoro and Allard found that most of the teacher education students had not thought of themselves as ethnic beings and did not understand the impact that ethnicity has on one's life. The researchers write, "Several of the student-teachers mentioned that they had never thought of themselves as having a particular ethnic background" (Santoro & Allard, 2005, p. 867). These researchers believe that ethnicity and social class are integral to the identities of learners and teachers and they conclude their research with an important question: "how do we help students and teachers understand this reality?" (Santoro & Allard, 2005, p. 872).

With four teachers as participants, I conducted a broad study whose intention was to investigate how teachers facilitated ethnic identity development among their students through curricula. What emerged from that study was the model that I present here for promoting ethnic identity *exploration* in education. Although researchers in both teacher education and psychology agree that ethnic identity development is critical to the psychological well-being of students, and that it is a developmental process that warrants intervention by teachers within the school context, there are no published models to assist teachers in the important work of promoting ethnic identity exploration in their students. This gap in the literature led to my research question: How do teachers of adolescents promote ethnic identity exploration through curricula and teaching? In the sections that follow, I explain my positionality and role, as well as the conceptual framework for both the study of teachers and this paper. I then describe the methodology I used for the present study. Following the methodology, I present the themes that emerged from the study and that form the basis for the model of Ethnic Identity Exploration in Education. I end the paper with a discussion of implications for teacher education and future research.

1.5. Researcher's positionality and role

I am an African American male teacher educator at a large urban university in the Southwest region of the United States. I am also a former public school teacher having taught elementary, middle, and high school students in the United States and abroad. Ethnic identity exploration was absent from the curricula and pedagogies of the K-12 public schools I attended but, as an adult, I developed a strong connection to my ethnic group. I presently teach undergraduates, teacher credential candidates, and graduate students who tell me that their K-12 (primary through secondary) education experiences did not promote their ethnic identity development. They also tell me that although they desperately want to know how to "deal with" ethnicity in their public school classrooms, they do not know *how* to go about this work, and neither their teacher preparation coursework, nor their practicum experiences provide any clues in this regard. They affirm that before reading literature related to ethnic identity in my courses, they were unaware that nurturing ethnicity could be accomplished in the classroom. They are equally unaware that doing so would be beneficial to students academically.

I chose to be a non-participant observer because I did not want to interrupt the usual atmosphere of the classroom. I wanted the teachers to continue with their usual teaching routines. I arrived before the learners and took my position in the back of the classrooms so that my presence would be unobtrusive.

1.6. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework I use for this study and the model of ethnic identity exploration in education is informed by the work of Gay (2010b), Ladson-Billings (1995), Phinney (1989) and Rivas-

Drake (2011). Culturally Responsive Teaching, as conceptualized by Gay, assumes that 1) teachers have both positive attitudes about the students they are teaching and that these teachers expect their students to achieve at high levels, 2) teachers allow and encourage cultural expression in the classroom, 3) cultural diversity is reflected in the curriculum, 4) instructional strategies will be consistent with the culture of students in the classroom. In her popular text, *Culturally Responsive Teaching,* Gay (2010b), has reviewed numerous culturally responsive curricular programs and pedagogical practices that have proven successful in promoting the academic achievement of African American, Native American, Latino, and Asian American students. Students learn subject matter content through examples of their culture, and the cultures of their classroom peers. Gay (2010b) has noted that students who have been exposed to these programs and practices have achieved at high levels because the individuals implementing the programs and practices believe the students are academically capable and because they use the cultures that the students bring to school to cultivate success. She writes, "Teaching is most effective when ecological factors, such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities of teachers and students, are included in its implementation" (Gay, 2010b, p. 22). The present study builds on the work of culturally responsive teaching presented by Gay.

Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed a theoretical framework for culturally relevant pedagogy, which included teachers encouraging academic success, helping students to be culturally competent, and teaching students to recognize and critique social inequities that schools perpetuate. Ladson-Billings' qualitative study of eight teachers of academically successful African American students revealed that it was possible to address cultural identity within the school context, and that doing so actually helped to sustain students' academic engagement. In her study, students were eager to demonstrate their abilities to "read, write, speak, compute, pose and solve problems at sophisticated levels—that is, pose their own questions about the nature of teacher- or text-posed problems and engage in peer review of problem solutions" (p. 475). Ladson-Billings explains how engagement was operationalized:

> Because these African-American male students were permitted, indeed encouraged, to be themselves in dress, language style, and interaction styles while achieving in school, the other students, who regarded them highly (because of their popularity), were able to see academic engagement as 'cool.' (p. 476).

The students of the teachers in her study did not deny their ethnicity in order to succeed academically as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) reported was the practice of academically successful African American students. Rather, as the teachers centralized culture in their teaching, their students claimed their ethnicity and used it to achieve academic success.

Ladson-Billings wrote, "Culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). The present study provides evidence of one way for teachers to help students to accomplish this task. Building on the work of culturally relevant pedagogy, the present study suggests four approaches that show *how* teachers can help students to explore their ethnic identity through the curriculum and achieve academic success.

Phinney (1989) has applied Marcia's (1980) work in identity statuses to ethnic identity, and has identified four stages of ethnic identity development: ethnic identity diffusion, a lack of a clear sense of ethnic identity; ethnic identity foreclosure, a commitment to an ethnic identification without exploration of one's ethnicity; ethnic identity moratorium, a period of ethnic identity exploration;

and ethnic identity achievement, a commitment to an ethnic identification, characterized by a clear understanding of ethnicity.

While in ethnic identity moratorium, adolescents explore their ethnic histories, traditions, and customs (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Tarver, 1988). In a study of Black and White middle school students, Phinney and Tarver (1988) found that teenagers, in moratorium, talked with family members and read books in their search for ethnic identification. In a self-report study of 91 Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White tenth graders, Phinney (1989) found that one quarter of the students were in the stage of moratorium, that is, engaged in a search for ethnic identity. Phinney admits that her instrument did not measure the ethnic identity of White students well, but of the teenagers of color in her study, she wrote, "It appears that these youth, regardless of the specific group, face a similar need to deal with the fact of their membership in an ethnic minority group in a predominantly White society… " (Phinney, 1989, p. 45). These students of color, like those adolescents in all of the studies cited in this section, were searching for ethnic identity. The focus of the present study is how teachers, within the school context, can support students in their exploration of ethnic identity.

Although Phinney (1992) originally identified four stages of development in her Multiethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), her revised version of this measure (MEIM-R) provides two subscales: exploration and commitment (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Having reviewed studies of ethnic identity by other researchers using the MEIM, and having conducted new studies using the MEIM-R, Phinney and Ong (2007) have provided statistical analysis to support the reliability of their measure and have concluded that a preponderance of participant responses load onto the factors of exploration or commitment. Significant to the present conceptual framework is the finding by these researchers that a majority of responders, ages 11−22 years old, were in the exploration status of ethnic identity development.

Rivas-Drake (2011) also found "exploration" to be of significance to the ethnic identity development of respondents. Rivas-Drake administered self-report measures of ethnic identity to 383 Latino/a adolescents in two sample groups. One group consisted of university adolescents with a median age of 19.46; a second group consisted of high school adolescents with a median age of 16.17. She found that among both university and high school students, higher levels of ethnic identity exploration were associated with higher self-esteem. Among high school students, ethnic identity exploration was also linked to stronger feelings of school attachment. Relevant to the present research was her conclusion that school policies and climates that afforded students opportunities to explore their ethnic identities may contribute to greater levels of engagement with school and a positive sense of self. Consistent with the broader corpus of ethnic identity development literature, this consistent finding of participants being in the exploration status of ethnic identity development provides a warrant for educators to provide students with opportunities for ethnic identity exploration within the school context.

Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) investigated the importance of Ethnic Racial Identity (ERI) for adjustment in adolescence, specifically psychological, academic, and health outcomes. They reviewed empirical research from 1990 to 2012 of ERI for African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian Pacific Islander adolescents, who were between 9 and 19 years old. Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) found that positive feelings about one's ethnic group were associated with positive psychosocial functioning and academic outcomes for African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection

The data reported here are a part of a larger study and data set that included four teachers: one high school teacher, one middle school teacher, and two elementary school teachers. I used a grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) because I wanted to build theory about how teachers facilitated ethnic identity development among their students. The primary sources of data were interviews with the teachers, which were taped, transcribed, and coded. The present article reflects the analysis of data that were collected from only the middle school teacher and the high school teacher. I collected data over one semester at Multi-ethnic Middle School and Hilltop High School (pseudonyms). Both schools were located in a large northwest urban city. Multi-ethnic Middle School was 52% White, 18% Black, 15% Asian, 12% Latino, and 3% American Indian (Lakeland Public Schools, 2013a). Hilltop High School was 34% Asian, 31% White, 30% Black, 4% Latino, and 1% American Indian (Lakeland Public Schools, 2013b).

I used a grounded theory methodology because I wanted to be able to examine closely and to understand deeply the work of a few teachers rather than to gain a broader, perhaps shallow understanding of the work of many teachers, which would be accomplished through other methodologies. In-depth interviews with the teachers and observations of their classrooms constituted the primary sources of data. Using a semi-structured process, I interviewed each teacher four times. Four interviews were manageable given the number of participants and the time constraints of the larger study of which this report is a sub-set. The interview protocol that I created included basic demographic questions, as well as professional preparation and ethnic identity questions (e.g., name, subject taught, years teaching, disposition regarding teaching, philosophy of education, participant's ethnic identity, definition of ethnicity, position regarding teacher's facilitating ethnic identity exploration). Each interview lasted from one to three hours. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

In addition to the interviews, I observed each of the teachers three times. In addition to comparing interview data with observational data, I wanted to become a "trusted" person, as described by Glesne and Peshkin (1992). They write,

> You will learn firsthand how the actions of your others correspond to their words; see patterns of behavior; experience the unexpected, as well as the expected; and develop a quality of trust with your others that motivates them to tell you what otherwise they might not. (p. 39)

Looking for consistencies and inconsistencies between what teachers said about promoting ethnic identity exploration in education and what they actually did, I took extensive notes during these observations. In order to confirm the trustworthiness of data, I scheduled interviews and observations so that I could follow-up observations with clarifying questions during interviews, and similarly, witness, during observations, behavior consistent or inconsistent with positions espoused by the teachers during interviews. Observations of the teachers took place during their social studies lessons because previous studies (Peshkin, 1991) revealed that the social studies subject matter was an appropriate curricular vehicle for promoting ethnic identity development. Moreover, two of the ten themes of Social Studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010), Culture and Individual Development and Identity, relate directly to ethnic identity development.

2.2. Participants

The teachers were selected using a nomination procedure similar to that described by Ladson-Billings (1995). I asked the principals at a middle school and a high school to use their professional criteria to nominate excellent social studies teachers who showed an interest in ethnic identity as potential participants. I invited Helen M. and Joe J. (pseudonyms), as well as a White female and an African American female to participate in the larger study because they affirmed their interest in ethnic identity and had some scholarly experience with the subject (See Table 1). All of the participants brought their ethnic positions to the study; however, because of space limitations, only the data from Helen and Joe are reported here.

2.3. Data analysis

The data analyzed included interview transcripts, observation notes, field notes, and artifacts such as curricular resources. I relied heavily on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1996) to generate all levels of coding for all data, as I completed an analysis for each of the teachers and a comparison analysis of both of the teachers reported on here. I generated codes for the concepts that emerged, and as concepts and "sets of concepts" (Strauss & Corbin, 1996, p. 278) became apparent, I began to see broad categories (e.g., "teachers making connections with families," "discussions in the classroom," "assignments that allowed students to explore their ethnicities," "use of role models" "ethnicity in the classroom environment," "history," "traditions," "race"). I compared these broad categories and saw some similarities and differences in their practices of promoting ethnic identity exploration in education. I provided another qualitative researcher with a list of the codes and their meanings and clean samples of the transcripts for each of the teachers for coding. The inter-rater reliability for coding of these broad categories was 0.80. To increase the credibility of the findings and interpretations of the study, I provided the participants with slices of the data and asked them to reflect on the accuracy of the statements they made and my interpretations of the same, a process called "member checks," as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 315). The interview data were triangulated by the observation data. The relationships of the broad categories among the teachers, along with the related literature, led me to identify the dimensions of ethnic identity exploration in education that I am introducing here.

Table 1
Teachers' profiles.

Teacher	Grade/Subject/Age of Students	Ethnicity	Years Teaching	Professional Experience with Ethnicity
Joe Jones	Tenth/History/15 years	African American	22	Took a university course on "Contributions of Ethnic Groups to American Society"
Helen Mishikawa	Sixth/English Language Arts/Social Studies/11 years	Japanese American	9	Ethnic Studies Major at University

3. Findings: A model of four dimensions of ethnic identity exploration in education

Based on ethnic identity development literature and the present study, I argue that a model of Ethnic Identity Exploration in Education will include the following dimensions: 1) making connections with students' families about ethnicity and ethnic identity, 2) engaging students in ethnic identity discourses, 3) guiding students in exploration of their ethnic histories, traditions, and customs, and 4) introducing students to social justice role models within their ethnic groups. I argue further that this model that emerged from the data allows all teachers to promote ethnic identity exploration while teaching subject matter content that is prescribed by state and national standards. Despite receiving no formal preparation in ethnic identity *development* or *exploration* in their teacher preparation programs, these veteran teachers believed it was their professional duty to design opportunities for their students to explore their ethnicities through curricula.

3.1. A professional responsibility

The teachers in the present study were convinced that promoting ethnic identity exploration was their professional responsibility. When I asked Joe why he engages in this work, he reminisced, "All we had was *Little Black Sambo* (Bannerman, 2017). I can see that tiger right now, trying to eat Little Black Sambo. I have a responsibility not to pass the poison on." Because of the pictures in the book, he identified with Little Black Sambo, and he saw as lethal to his African Americaness the only book that he had during the six years of his primary (K-6) schooling (1954–1960) that ostensibly represented cultural diversity. Primarily because of its pickaninny caricatures, Black and White critics in the United States denounced the book as racist (Jeyathurai, 2012), and it was banned in some schools; but they were never able to get it completely removed from schools (Storyteller, 2018). Joe did not want to replicate the assault on African Americans and other ethnic groups; he chose instead to affirm his students' ethnic groups by promoting ethnic identity exploration. Not all teachers have been exposed to racist picture books in their childhood, but all teachers should be aware of the small and insidious acts of racism, as well as the denigration of ethnic groups that is widely evident in popular culture.

Joe made his sense of obligation clear saying:

Being able to teach is a gift. I feel obligated to make people whole and to share what is important for humanity as payment for my gift. That obligation really becomes important when you start to deal with identities. We've got to make whole, healthy human beings.

He does not believe that ethnic identity exploration, and his professional obligation, should be limited to any one ethnic group; he sees the inherent worth, value, and contributions of all ethnic groups (past and present) to the fabric of this nation. He believes all teachers should be helping to make the students in their classrooms healthy through ethnic identity exploration.

As the only Japanese American in her class, Helen experienced a lot of shaming about her ethnicity in her K-12 (primary and secondary) schooling. When she went to university and majored in Ethnic Studies, she realized she did not need to be ashamed of her ethnicity. She told me about an epiphany that occurred at university: "I started seeing all these sides and pictures and reading. I could see another side; then I realized that I had only seen one side. But I want my kids to see all sides. You need balance." Contrary to the teasing and insults from the students in secondary and primary school, at university she learned about the rich history of the Japanese people and the contributions that Japanese Americans had made to American society. She became convinced that teachers should balance the negative messages that students received about their ethnic groups with positive information about their groups. Making sure that students feel respected and that they "fit in" are priorities for Helen. She told me emphatically, "Respect is what ought to be essential for us in teaching and learning about ethnic identity development—respect. Kids have to feel that they're respected, and that they belong, and that they fit in somewhere." She said that "respect" and "fitting in" meant that children should learn how their ethnic groups have contributed to the fabric of the American tapestry, so that "no one could be able to tell them that they don't belong," or that they should, "go back where they came from." Given Helen's schooling experience, it seems reasonable then that she included in her pedagogy a commitment to ensure that her students would not feel left out or abandoned ethnically. A commitment to social justice motivated these teachers to support the ethnic identity exploration of their students.

3.2. Making connections with students' families about ethnic identity

The Research Trip Project was one of a number of assignments that *Helen included in her curriculum each year to help students explore their ethnic identity. Students have the opportunity to prepare for a trip to their ethnic group's country of origin. Sensitive to the reality that some students may not be developmentally ready to explore their ethnicity, Helen gives students the option of researching any country.* This project was a part of a larger investigation, which integrated Social Studies, English Language Arts, and Mathematics. Activities related to this project included conducting research on the language, history, traditions, cost of living, struggles, and customs of identified ethnic groups; creating and maintaining a budget for a virtual two-week stay in the chosen country, and writing reports using the data gathered.

Parents were consulted regarding the purpose of the project and invited to take part in its different phases and activities. Creating or reproducing a family crest was one related activity in which family members were involved. As not all students could identify with this European concept of a family crest, Helen gave students the option of identifying something in their ethnic group's customs or traditions, or creating a symbol, to represent their ethnic group. Always sensitive to individual differences, Helen consistently provided students with alternative activities.

Parents or primary caregivers assisted with the creation of a class quilt, which featured replicas of all of the family crests or symbols of ethnicities. To assist in the creation of the class quilt, primary caregivers transferred the drawn crests and student symbols of ethnic groups onto fabric, and sewed the individual pieces of fabric together for the quilt. This quilt was prominently displayed in the classroom below a caption which read, "Our Quilt Story: A Patchwork of Migration Tales." The culminating activity for the Research Trip Project was a "Bistro" event for which students and their families prepared food from their various ethnic groups, which they shared with other members of the class. The bistro event should not be construed as, "Food, fun, and fiesta" (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010; Haynes Writer, 2008), which is derided as, "Superficial or watered down diversity" (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010, p. 71). Such events are isolated from the curriculum. Helen's Bistro event was not isolated from the curriculum; it was one part of the curricular activities of ethnic identity exploration. Before the Bistro event, students conducted a thorough investigation of significant aspects of the ethnic groups they chose to study, including historical events, languages, economies, literature,

celebrations, contributions to society, and current events. Helen said, "students had to prepare to survive in whatever society the ethnic group was situated, including their struggles." Integrated into the curriculum, the Bistro event allowed students to celebrate their work and the ethnic groups that contributed to their new knowledge.

As I learned about Helen consistently making contacts with parents and collaborating with parents and other primary caregivers about these activities, what emerged was a broad category of *making connections with students' families about ethnic identity.* With communications and collaborative efforts, Helen assured parents that the school's goal was to affirm, rather than deny or denigrate, the ethnicities of their children (See Table 2). Teachers and primary caregivers collaborate to facilitate the healthy ethnic identity development of the students just as they collaborate to ensure the students' cognitive and social development, among other developmental processes. When parents challenged Helen's methods, such as demanding, "when are the children going to learn real history?" in response to Helen having students investigate the history of their ethnic groups in their state, Helen explained that teaching the history of the state through the children's ethnic groups *was* real history.

3.3. Engaging students in ethnic identity discourse

Joe confidently used discussion as a pedagogical strategy in his classes. Proudly he said, "Of all the instructional strategies used in the learning experience, discussion is the most powerful because when students leave here, they take the discussion with them. It's not something that they can lose on a piece of paper." As an African American, familiar with the power of the oral tradition (Blackhawk, 1990; Hess, 2009), he wants his students to remember these discussions for life, not just for the next test. Joe reported that, "The students brought forth 'self-identification,' 'racism,' 'oppression,' 'freedom,' 'mixed-race heritage,' 'white supremacy,' 'a very white curriculum,' 'resisting pressure to forget who you are' and being a 'sellout,' as ethnic identity topics." These topics revealed the anger, resentment and the subtle and overt pressures students felt—especially at school—to lose their ethnic distinction, to forget about or ignore those things that make one ethnically different, and Joe acknowledged these feelings. He said students were especially angry with students who were perceived to be "sellouts," because "they did not even put up a fight, they just lost themselves." The students understood that some assimilation was understandable, but not to the point of losing one's ethnic identity.

As would be expected, some of the discussions led to critical thinking and analysis, as when the African American girls asked, "Why are all the Black guys asking the White girls to the prom?" Neither Joe nor his students were willing to avoid such discussions, and Joe navigated difficult conversations by setting parameters for discussions. He did not allow students to attack individuals, but they could name and talk freely about behaviors. Among the topics brought forth by Joe's students were whether or not one could change one's ethnicity or race, retaining one's ethnic identity, and how racism, mixed-race heritage, and white supremacy influence

one's ethnic identity. Joe affirmed that student responses to the discussions were positive, and that these discussions engendered a desire to know more about themselves as ethnic beings. The students learned to value and to appreciate differing points of view, and became aware that other students shared their thoughts, questions, and struggles. They learned how 1) to have spirited discussions about challenging subject matter and 2) to leave these discussions enlightened and enriched. Joe set the ground rules and modeled this behavior.

As robust discussion seemed to have characterized all of Joe's teaching, the theme that emerged was *engaging students in ethnic identity discourse*. The following conclusions regarding ethnic identity discourse can be drawn from these data: Engaging students in ethnic identity discourse will likely help them to clarify their ethnicity by giving them opportunities to ask and answer questions related to ethnicity and race such as occurred in Joe's classroom. Teachers in similar situations may have similar positive results as they provide students with age appropriate definitions of ethnicity, race, and their related concepts and attend to the developmental needs of students.

3.4. Exploration of ethnic histories, traditions, and customs

The *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010) include ten themes, the first of which is "Culture" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010, Chapter 2). The Standards specifically describe the student's role when "Culture," is implemented in public schools: "They begin to identify the cultural basis for some celebrations and ways of life in their community and in examples from across the world" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010; para. 4). Helen taught the concept, "celebration," in a 4-month unit of the same name and assisted students in researching their ethnic histories, traditions, and customs. The unit also helped students to learn about different types of celebrations from the diverse ethnic groups represented in their classroom. Helen began the unit by defining "celebrations" and asking students to share with the class celebrations that are important in their families. On the day that I observed her, she read, I'm in Charge of Celebrations (Baylor, 1986) and Too Many Tamales (Soto & Martinez, 1996), after which students were required to write about "a memorable celebration or tradition" in their family. These stories were later compiled into a bound book, and given to each student. Helen provided the following rationale for the celebration learning activities:

> This year I had them pick a celebration that was memorable because I wanted to make it more personable, rather than research oriented. With a lot of the students, the cultural stuff would come out if they were strongly identified with their ethnic group or had a well developed ethnic identity.

Although some may label this introduction "tokenistic," this unit thoroughly interrogated cultures of the students' choices, and was consistent with the *National Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010).

Table 2
Strategies for making connections with families about ethnic identity.

Strategy	Helen	Joe J.
Informal letters home	✓	
Telephone calls	✓	
Discussion at Parent Teacher Conferences	✓	✓
Invitations to make classroom presentations about one's ethnic group	✓	✓
Visiting with families in their homes or neighborhoods	✓	

Helen understood that individuals in her classes were at different levels of ethnic identification, thus she had each student identify an event that was individually meaningful. She believed that exploring ethnicity in her Celebrations unit provided opportunities for all students to deepen their understanding of ethnicity, and for individuals to make ethnic identity decisions. Identifying family traditions is directly related to the course content, as the state legislature's teaching standards require the teaching of family traditions (Washington State Legislature, 2018), and the National Standards for the Preparation of Social Studies Teachers expectation for culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The standards explain, "This practice incorporates curriculum and teaching strategies that build on the learners' personal, family, and community experiences" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2018, p. 23).

Helen also used individual strategies to encourage her students to explore their ethnicity. Helen knew that David, one of her students, was ashamed of his Chinese and European American mixed ethnicity because he had revealed this fact in written assignments. When Helen learned that David was to attend an immigration convention with his grandfather, she suspected that it was a "Paper Sons" convention, a gathering of a special class of Chinese immigrants to the United States. She gently but purposefully told David, "You gotta find out if this convention is about Paper Sons, and you gotta do a paper on it." According to Helen, "David rolled his eyes like, 'it's gonna be so boring, how embarrassing.'" Following his trip to the convention, David told Helen, "I have to talk to you about Paper Sons."

From the excitement in his voice and sparkle in his eyes, Helen knew that David had had a positive experience exploring his ethnicity. David was very excited to tell his teacher that following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, "sons of citizens" represented one of very few categories of Chinese people allowed into the United States. Following the fire of 1906 in San Francisco which destroyed all immigration records, "Paper Sons" were individuals who were sons on paper only, i.e., they claimed to be sons of a Chinese resident living in the United States in order to be allowed into the country.

The dimension that emerged from the analysis of these data was *Exploration of ethnic histories, traditions, and customs*. Conclusions from these data are that 1) it is reasonable to use students' ethnic histories, traditions, and customs as *resources* for learning subject matter concepts, and 2) when concepts, e.g., "Celebration," are the focus of instruction, and examples from various ethnic groups are used to teach the concepts, e.g., Kwanzaa, Chinese New Year, Oktoberfest, teachers will not reify one ethnic group by repeatedly using the same ethnic specific example to teach a concept.

3.5. Introducing students to social justice role models within their ethnic groups

As an adult, Helen understood the need for role models in her ethnic group because they were absent from her childhood experience. She said, "I was so ashamed, I would not eat rice at school and I never ate with chop sticks." However, having been introduced to individuals in her ethnic group, through her Ethnic Studies major, who affirmed, rather than eschewed, their ethnicity, she could reveal in one of our interviews, "I realized I had nothing to be ashamed of." She had explored her ethnic history, learned about the contributions that individuals in her ethnic group had made to the group and to American society, and had reevaluated her ethnic identity. Consequently, she affirms her students' ethnicities when working with the whole class or with individuals.

Joe said that his parents and teachers told the children often that, "they should not grow up to be a no-account." Joe clarified the meaning of "no-account" saying, "everybody knew a no-account person was somebody who would not amount to anything. And everybody knew you didn't want to be that person." As a contrast to a "no-account, he offered the Black doctor from his childhood community and said, "everybody looked up to him." Joe told me that role models like the African American doctor and African American teachers contributed to his own decision to make ethnic identity development a part of his teaching.

Role models were significant, rather than superficial, and were a focal point of one of Joe's assignments in which students interviewed individuals from their ethnic groups. Students in Joe's classes were required to interview members of their ethnic communities regarding topics from their history text, as a way of introducing students to role models within their ethnic groups. During one class, he told students that he wanted them to interview members of their ethnic groups and to find out how their ethnic communities experienced "cheap labor." He then told them that they would come to class and compare and contrast the experiences of cheap labor among African Americans, European Americans, and Mexican Americans.

Joe also created opportunities for students to share the knowledge and excitement they had gained about their ethnic groups with the larger school community. Joe explained to the students how three of his classes would present their information to the school related to other school concepts:

We're going to produce an assembly and a small book of history about what we are studying now, World War II, the Industrial Revolution, and things related to work, from the perspectives of your family and friends. You will share your findings about your families' histories during the assembly, using the theme, 'History As We Know It From the Experience Of Family And Friends.'

Joe said, "I want students to get firsthand accounts from people that they look up to in their ethnic group." Consistent with culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010b), Joe revealed that he intended students to have gained a better understanding of the relevance of their ethnicity to the subject matter they were studying while they heard about the experiences of their ethnic group members. The assembly was to have provided a number of benefits for all students who were in attendance: First, Joe wanted to convey to students that school officials valued their ethnic group experiences and contributions, so they, too, should hold their ethnic group in high regard. Second, the assembly provided an opportunity for all the students in the audience to think about their ethnic group membership, and to see connections between their ethnic groups' experiences and their academic learning. All of the students in the audience could likely recall a person in their ethnic group who took a stand against being maligned or marginalized in the larger society. Joe reported that the attendance of students in his classes improved when he demonstrated that he valued their ethnic groups' experiences.

The data of the assembly at which the larger school community learned about interviews with individuals who had experienced the social injustice of cheap labor, as well as Joe having discussions with his students about the Black doctor and teachers whose success had motivated him to become a teacher, provided warrant for a dimension of *Introducing students to social justice role models within their ethnic groups*. The kind of role models Joe and his students identified were individuals who made positive differences in society, and were proud to stand up and speak out about social justice issues. Colin Kaepernick, the African American former San Francisco 49ers Quarterback became a social justice role model for many African Americans and other people of color, not just because he was a famous football player, but because he "took a knee," and began speaking out about police brutality in the African American

community (Levin, 2017). Community members may be eager to make positive impressions on students, and teachers can invite these individuals to share their expertise at appropriate times during the curricular calendar. Teachers who use role models should structure these interactions so that students meet social justice role models who are proud of their ethnic group membership. These are not the "heroes" that Banks (2016) decries in discussing "heroes" and "holidays." Adding heroes to the curriculum is the *goal*, rather than a *starting point*, for some teachers. Conversely, social justice role models, who challenge societal norms when necessary, assist in transforming the curriculum.

4. Discussion

The research question for this study was, "How do teachers of adolescents promote ethnic identity exploration through curricula and teaching?" The culturally relevant pedagogy literature has provided teachers with theory and praxis for using the culture of students in order to help students understand subject matter content (Gay, 2010b; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These successful practices assume some level of understanding of culture (conscious or unconscious) on the part of students, as well as the assumption that culturally relevant curricula and pedagogies will result in improved student learning outcomes. The new model of ethnic identity exploration in education proposed here builds on this work and answers the research question in the form of a new framework that may be used by teachers as they support students' ethnic identity exploration while learning subject matter content (See Fig. 1). Ethnic identity exploration in education is a pedagogical tool for teachers to use as they create opportunities for all students to gain deeper levels of understanding of their ethnic groups by exploring their ethnicities through curricula.

Four broad propositions emerged from this study and they represent the dimensions within which the teachers did the work of providing opportunities for ethnic identity exploration while teaching subject matter content: 1) making connections with students' families about ethnic identity, 2) engaging students in ethnic identity discourse, 3) providing opportunities for students to explore their ethnic histories, traditions, and customs, and 4) introducing students to social justice role models within their ethnic groups. The teachers deduced from discussions that they had with students, as well as student writings in journals and other written work, that the learning activities associated with these four dimensions provided students with opportunities to clarify their ethnic identity.

4.1. Implications for teacher education

This new model of ethnic identity exploration in education presents teacher educators with a challenge to be bold enough to make room in the teacher education curriculum for ethnic identity exploration. This bold action will mean that teacher educators who may have denied and/or ignored ethnic identity, will begin to educate themselves about ethnic identity, and to include in curricula this critical developmental process that affects the lives of all children, and specifically the lives of children of color (Clark & Flores, 2001). Where teachers take up this challenge, students of color would find their ethnic groups affirmed and valued in curricula and White students would be able to identify the ethnic groups of rich heritages to which they belong.

Helping students to explore and to affirm their ethnic identity is a social justice action that should be undertaken in places where it is not now practiced. The evidence from these teachers makes clear that ethnic identity exploration for both students of color and for
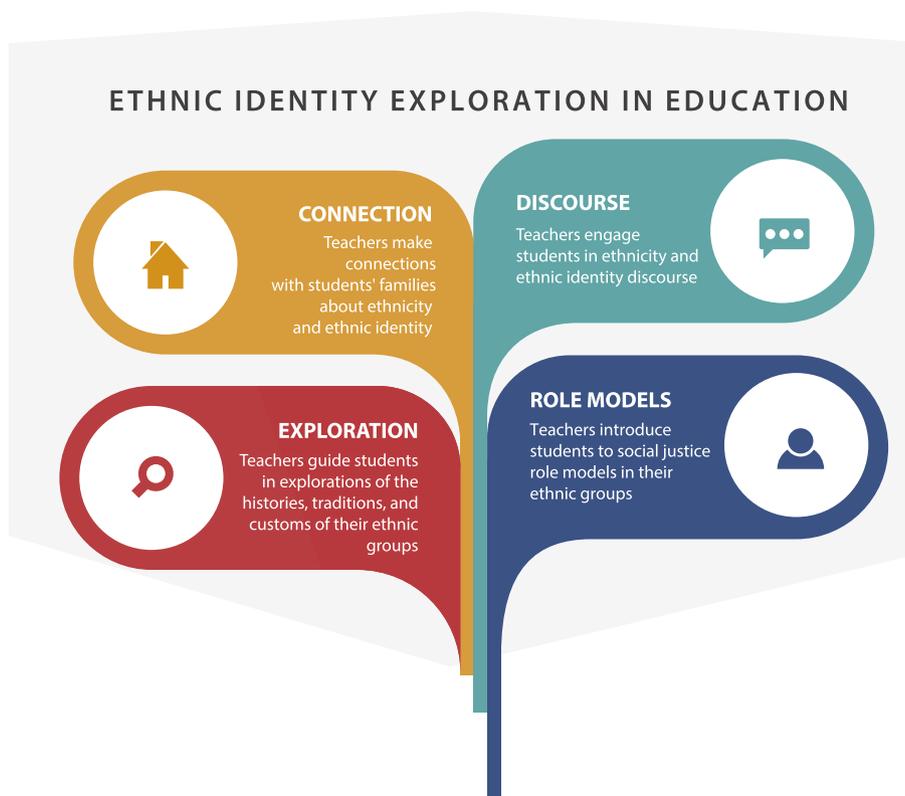

ETHNIC IDENTITY EXPLORATION IN EDUCATION

CONNECTION
Teachers make connections with students' families about ethnicity and ethnic identity

DISCOURSE
Teachers engage students in ethnicity and ethnic identity discourse

EXPLORATION
Teachers guide students in explorations of the histories, traditions, and customs of their ethnic groups

ROLE MODELS
Teachers introduce students to social justice role models in their ethnic groups

Fig. 1. Four dimensions of ethnic identity exploration in education.

white students is NOT simply embracing one's rich heritage, but transforming one's own view of ethnicity, inequality, and privilege. New here is a systematic approach for ethnic identity exploration in teachers' ongoing work in social justice education (Adams, Bell, Goodman, & Joshi, 2016).

Ethnic identity exploration in education is also an opportunity to help to stem the tide of young people dropping out of school because of curricula that is irrelevant to their lived experiences (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Chavous et al., 2003). Ethnic identity exploration in teacher education is intended to prepare and to equip pre-service teachers with tools for responding to students who are searching for answers regarding their ethnic identity within school settings. While teaching subject matter content, teachers should be able to define ethnicity and ethnic identity, direct students to resources for information about ethnic histories, traditions and customs, answer questions about resisting societal denigration as a buffer against ethnic identity attacks, and to help students identify examples of individuals in their ethnic groups who speak out against social injustice. The teachers in this study created lessons and units and used learning activities that were tailored to the needs of their students in culturally diverse classrooms in urban settings in order to provide opportunities for ethnic identity exploration. In schools where formal curricula do not address ethnic identity issues, the curricula need to be adapted to promote ethnic identity exploration.

What this new model contributes to the field is qualitative evidence that goes beyond mere technical terms, and to the heart of how to actually support ethnic identity development. Among the effective practices evident here are 1) using multiple examples from different ethnic groups as resources for teaching subject matter concepts, 2) using powerful ethnic identity discourse to transform ones' view of self and others, 3) using discourse to reach students who may have a rich history of oral tradition, 4) setting guidelines for students as they engage in difficult conversations so that others are not put down, but rather ideas are questioned, 5) student-generated topics such as "interracial dating in school," "white supremacy," "resisting selling-out." Teacher educators have the unique opportunity to demonstrate these effective practices for their pre-service teachers.

4.2. Implications for future research

Scholars in teacher education and psychology should work collaboratively to produce research that will confirm or refute the model presented here. Future studies should include a larger number of participants who are able to provide greater diversity in ethnicity of teachers, subject matter taught, and school district geography (suburban and rural). Future research should include quantitative measures and student perspectives that reveal the impact of ethnic identity exploration on student academic achievement.

Ethnic identity in teacher education is important to equip pre-service teachers to meet the educational and psychological needs of their future students, and for teacher self concept and efficacy (Clark & Flores, 2001). Future research should investigate what additional experiences might be necessary to engender a desire to promote ethnic identity exploration. Investigations of the present model with pre-service teachers is needed to further inform the profession about the value of using the dimensions with pre-service teachers and their future students. Although whiteness in teacher education has been investigated (Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Sleeter, 2001), additional research is needed to focus on white racial and ethnic identity in education so that ethnic identity exploration in education is not framed as something that teachers of color do for children of color (Matias & Grosland, 2016).

As has been discussed here, literature in psychology provides explanations of psychological benefits to ethnic identity development. Some educators may conclude that benefits, such as overall psychological well-being, are sufficient, as they are indirectly related to schooling and academic achievement. However, as legislators and the general public call for more accountability on the part of teachers, additional funding for ethnic studies courses and additional research to investigate links between ethnic identity exploration and academic achievement are needed.

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