

The Politics of Identity: A Longitudinal Study of the Sociopolitical Development of Education Leaders

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Abstract : This study examines the longitudinal impact (10 years) of a course for education leaders designed to encourage the development of critical consciousness surrounding issues of equity, oppression, power, and privilege. The ability to resist and challenge oppression across social and cultural contexts can be acquired through the use of transformative pedagogies that create spaces that use the practice of exploration to make connections between pervasive structural and institutional practices and race and ethnicity. This study seeks to extend this understanding by exploring the longitudinal influence of participating in a course that utilizes transformative pedagogies, course materials, exercises, and activities to encourage the practice of exploration of student experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination with the end goal of providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills that foster their ability to resist and challenge oppression and discrimination -critical action- in their lives. To this end, we use the explanatory power of the theories of critical consciousness development, sociopolitical development, and social identity construction that view exploration as a crucial practice in understanding the role ethnic and racial differences play in creating opportunities or barriers in the lives of individuals. When educators use transformative pedagogies, they create a space where students collectively explore their experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination through course readings, in-class activities, and discussions. The end goal of this exploration is twofold: first, to encourage the student's ability to understand how differences are identified, given meaning to, and used to position them in specific places and spaces in their world; second, to scaffold students' ability to make connections between their individual and collective differences and particular institutional and structural practices that create opportunities or barriers in their lives. Studies have found the formal exploration of students' individual and collective differences in relation to their experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination results in developing an understanding of the roles race and ethnicity play in their lives. To trace the role played by exploration in identity construction, we utilize an integrative approach to identity construction informed by multiple theoretical frameworks grounded in cultural studies, social psychology, and sociology that understand social-cultural, racial, and ethnic -identities as dynamic and ever-changing based on context-specific environments. Stuart Hall refers to this practice as taking "symbolic detours through the past" while reflecting on the different ways individuals have been positioned based on their roots (group membership) and also how they, in turn, chose to position themselves through collective sense-making of the various meanings their differences carried through the routes they have taken. The practice of exploration in the construction of ethnic-racial identities has been found to be beneficial to sociopolitical development.

Keywords : political polarization, civic participation, democracy, education

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