

The online resource for  
principals with students  
aged 10 to 14

# Matters

June 2009

## How Young Adolescents' Identity Beliefs Affect Their Learning

*Academic success during young adolescence is directly connected to the way in which students search to define who they are..*

Dave F. Brown

**Y**oung adolescents are constantly searching for identity—the person they want to be. That search occurs through social events, family mores, and even offhand remarks of fellow students and teachers; through the cultural lenses of their families and classmates; and from the media messages they experience daily. Being “someone” or “something” is determined largely by unplanned events and the behavioral expectations surrounding their lives.

The search for identity reflects personal characteristics that affect daily academic performance. For example, middle school students may experience concerns about various identities that are related to academic performance:

**Gender identity.** Which roles do I (or will I) play as a male or female? What jobs might I hold based on my gender? How should males or females perform academically? Will my behavior as a male or female be acceptable to those whose opinions matter to me?

**Relational identity.** How do I get along with family, friends, peers, and teachers? Which relationships mean the most to me, and how will those relationships influence my academic behaviors?

**Physical identity.** Am I tall enough? Why is my hair dark instead of blond, curly instead of straight? Do I need more muscles, larger breasts, smaller feet, a deeper voice, and whiter teeth? If I'm good at athletics, drama, or music, or if I am particularly beautiful, then I don't have to do well in my classes because in the end my grades won't matter.

**Ethnic identity.** What does it mean to be Chicano, Italian, black, Asian, Puerto Rican, Iraqi, Indian, or Native American?

Are people of my ethnicity expected to do well academically? How important is academic success to my family? Should I accept my parents' expectations of appropriate dress, academic performance, dating rituals, and religious activity, or should I act more like many of my peers?

**Oppositional identity.** I don't want to act like the majority in a culture to which my family and I do not belong. My friends don't do homework and they're proud of it. My teacher is white and my family doesn't think she cares about us. Therefore, I'll act in ways that reflect the *opposite* of what the majority culture expects.

**Socioeconomic identity.** Some of my peers wear clothing that is much more expensive than mine. They have their own computers, iPods, and cell phones. They live in huge houses. I'll never have what those rich kids' families have, no matter how hard I work. So why should I try?

All of these perspectives affect academic identity as defined by these questions:

- How smart am I compared to others?
- How successful will I ever be in school?
- How important is it to my friends or family that I do well in school?
- Do my teachers believe that I can do some academic tasks well, that my efforts make a difference, or that I am capable of successfully completing most schoolwork?
- Do my teachers provide me with a sense of academic success and future growth, or do they send a message that I have little chance for further academic success?

Teacher attitudes and actions also can affect student performance. Some educators explicitly or implicitly reveal their limited expectations for future academic success by their low-performing students through inadvertent comments. The way in which teachers respond to the language their students use in class (e.g., “black” English or code switching among English-language learners) can have a significant impact on whether students initiate the effort needed to perform successfully. And a lack of cultural responsiveness in teaching can compromise the academic identity of ethnically diverse students.

### **Addressing Students’ Academic Identities**

Some teachers may believe that they can leave identity development concerns to parents or counselors, but effective middle schools need to address young adolescents’ identity development head-on. It starts with faculty conversations about their students’ identities and how their families’ perspectives reflect the development of positive academic identities. Teachers and administrators also must identify their own biases and consider how their personal views affect their students’ academic performance.

Educators need to develop specific strategies for identifying their students’ attitudes about their academic growth. They can design surveys to learn about students’ goals for the future, their perspectives on teacher support of their academic needs, and ways that the school can alter its program to better support those needs. They also can use parent surveys to gain perspectives on how teachers are meeting their youngsters’ academic needs.

Young adolescents need teacher guidance and frequent feedback during their search for identity. Class conversations should address how the media reflect academic success and how ethnicity is reflected through media images—both negatively and positively. Curricula in all subject areas should occasionally address the future lives of students as they enter adulthood—from the professional possibilities for men and women to the success of immigrants and adults of differing ethnicities in the United States.

Setting personal academic goals provides young adolescents with opportunities to use greater social responsibility and helps them meet their increased need for independence. Goal-setting opportunities help young people identify their needs and establish reasonable expectations for further academic growth.

Students also should be encouraged to self-evaluate, which can create opportunities for greater metacognitive growth. Perhaps the greatest advantage of personal goal-setting and self-evaluation is their impact on the development of an internal locus of control, in which students begin to take greater responsibility for their academic growth.

Academic success during young adolescence is directly connected to the way in which students search to define who they are. Because that search is fraught with opportunities for making poor decisions and developing inaccurate attitudes, it is important that middle-level educators work purposefully to help their students develop healthy perspectives about their identity that can lead to academic success.

---

**Dave F. Brown** is a professor in the College of Education at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. His e-mail address is [dbrown@wcupa.edu](mailto:dbrown@wcupa.edu).