Human beings begin to differentiate themselves and build and an individual identity early in life. It is considered a salient part of who we are. We “come to think of that identity as dependent on the person’s mind – even in the face of bodily growth and transformation” (Corriveau, 2005, p. 322). That concept of identity then becomes more and more complex as we grow older. William James, and other psychologists including Freud and Erickson, conceived notions of identity and theorized about the process of identity development. In James’ view:

[He] considered the self as the I, the self as the Knower, and Me as the self as known.

The Me is constituted of the material Me, the social Me, and the spiritual Me. The material Me is the bodily possessions that the individual owns. The social Me contains the roles the individual assigns to self which are recognized by others. The spiritual Me is composed of the individual’s states of consciousness, psychic faculties, and disposition. Perhaps, the metamorphosis of self as an ethnic individual occurs when the spiritual Me becomes awakened. (Riojas Clark & Bustos Flores, 2001, p. 80)

Another theory, among the many, posits that there are seven vectors which “include: 1) developing competence, 2) managing emotions, 3) moving through autonomy toward independence, 4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, 5) establishing identity, 6) developing purpose, and 7) developing integrity” (Hubbard, 2003, p. 4). It is clear from these descriptions of identity, which make allusions to identity as a complex construct, that it is influenced by a variety of factors, and that a single definition of identity and one theory of identity development does not exist. In the context of the United States, identity is wrapped up in issues of race, gender, sexuality and class. One important factor, which may not be as present outside of the United States, and is particularly important for immigrant communities is race, as
it is a visible marker of group membership. For immigrant groups, the process of negotiating an identity, that of a Latino, for example, is a complex process.

Coming from a place where race may not be a factor, for instance, is difficult to all of a sudden be faced with being labeled along racial lines. “In the Latin American context, analysis of social identities has centered primarily on class, ethnicity, gender, race, and nationality, considering ways in which elite and non-elite actors have tried to fashion the meanings of labels such as “woman”, “Maya”, or “peasant.”” (Olcott, 2003, p. 107). Adding to the complexity is redefining oneself as a minority. While the construction of a minority identity is based on identification with a group that is “other”, “the majority group was more likely to describe themselves utilizing universal categories, such as body image and personal attributes.” (Riojas Clark & Bustos Flores, 2001, p. 72). Susan Roberta Katz in her research found that “for the first time in [their] life[s], [immigrants] become a “minority,” a term meaning “less than,” the victim of racial and ethnic discrimination.” (Katz, 1996, p. 608).

One important factor for minority groups is the use of a particular language that links groups and creates a bond. This, too, can add a layer of complexity. Arana (2001), when writing about identity, states, “imagine an African American, a Native American, and an Arab American all defining themselves as the same ethnic group because they grew up speaking the English. Imagine them calling themselves “Anglos.”(p. 8). The use of Spanish, as opposed to English, is an important marker of identification with the Latino identity. Conversely, English use, is associated with a lower chance of identification with an ethnic label (Ono, 2002). Baez (2002), when eloquently writing about his own linguistic and cultural experiences in relation to schooling states that “[language] gives meaning to identity and culture (e.g., Puerto Rican or
Language regulates social existence.” (p. 129)

The development of an identity for Latinos is also complex because of the issue of labeling. In one study, the researcher provided fifteen different ethnic identifications for Latino students to choose from, these included “Mexican, Mexicano/a, Mexican American, Chicano/a, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Nuyorican/Neorican, Hispanic, Latino/a, Spanish, Spanish American, Raza, American, Hispano, and Other.” (Ono, 2002, p. 732). She found that identity was largely symbolic in nature, indicating that one is something other than ‘American’ (Ono, 2002). This symbolic identity is largely influenced by the surrounding network of others who share the same, or similar, ethnic origins. Similar to the experience of Latinos in the United States, earlier European immigrants also developed a larger ethnic community and ethnic identity in response to post-immigration experiences. (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004). For Latinos, the ethnic community’s influences often come in the form enseñazas, such as the teaching of the “concepts of familia (deep connection and loyalty to extended family) and respeto (respect of elders)” (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004, p. 563). Cultural ties and the formation of ethnic identity are largely related to the participation in an ethnic enclave which permit ethnic practices to continue (Ono, 2002).

Despite participation in an ethnic enclave where one has direct contact with others who share the same cultural values, and in some cases, the same cultural practices, immigrants are still thrust into a new environment where one is a minority, and possesses visual markers of identity. Ono (2002) found that individuals with darker skin color was “associated with a 60 percent increase in the chance of Mexican identification” (p. 726) as opposed to a hyphenated identity (Mexican-American) or Latino, or Hispanic. Further, for some women, “the use of the
term Mexicana can mean a person is embodying the following: I am conscious of my cultural heritage. I am identifying culturally, versus using the term Mexican, which carries a more traditional meaning.” (Riojas Clark & Bustos Flores, 2001, p. 81). Garcia Bedolla (2003) found in her research another contour in the creation of the meaning of the term “Latino”:

The 1st generation tended to define a “Latino” as a person who speaks Spanish. A few also defined “American” as those who spoke only English. The 2nd generation defined “Latino” as being those who spoke Spanish and English. This is in part reflective of their general desire to find a term that described their bicultural and bilingual experience in the United States. The 3rd + generation was more likely to define “Latino” as meaning of Latin American descent, rarely making direct reference to language ability. (p. 268)

The concept of assimilability into the white middle-class mainstream culture is also important when discussing Latino identity development and an important differentiating factor when comparing Latino immigrants with earlier waves of European immigrants. Latinos are sometimes considered unassimilable (Ono, 2002) which is partially attributed to the fact that “most Latino subgroups in the United States are not isolated from their countries of origin…regular travel back to countries of origin when political conditions permit…migrants to take advantage of technological advances to maintain contact.” (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004, p. 560). This regular contact with the countries of origin permits Latinos to maintain their ethnic identity, once established, rather than completely conform to the values and cultural practices of the mainstream culture. Interestingly, individuals may conform in certain situations, yet not in others based on their “perceptions regarding the instrumentality of particular behaviors in different contexts” (Ferdman, 1990, p. 191) thereby making the concept of assimilation a difficult one to define.
The perceived lack of assimilation on the part of Latinos in the United States is not entirely one of choice, however, because “generations of exclusion and discrimination, full integration into mainstream society has been barred to them, making issues of ethnicity and identity highly salient.” (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004, p. 560). Ono (2002) posits that this feature of discrimination is the most important features of ethnic identity development. Further, Katz (1996) found that, in her interviews with Latino youth, “the students’ cultural identity related to being Latino in that they saw being “Latino” as a marker of a minority group which was oppressed in this society.” Trueba (2002) looks at this as a positive stating that “oppression and abuse can also generate precisely the opposite – resilience and cultural capital to succeed – which often creates the psychological flexibility necessary to pass for or assume different identities for the sake of survival.” (p. 20)

One of the most important periods of time in terms of identity development is adolescence. Identity becomes more salient to adolescents as they interact with others from a variety of ethnic and minority groups. Through this process of interaction, the concept of ethnic identity becomes more and more important (Hubbard, 2003; Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004). Adolescence is a particularly important time for identity development because it is during that stage of development they have developed the capacity for abstract reasoning and “can understand the meaning and permanency of their group membership.” (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004, p. 561). Prior to the period of adolescence, ethnic minority youth take on a view of themselves that is largely shaped by the surrounding culture “with little questioning or thought” (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004, p. 561). A major feature of that acceptance is that youth become very aware that “Euro Americans [see] Latinos as uneducated, dirty, lazy and stupid” (Garcia Bedolla, 2003, p. 276). That negative perception of Latinos by the majority
culture has a significant impact on ethnic identity development. That process of ethnic identity development changes and develops, but is always influenced by the context of the surrounding social environment. For example, Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) in their research found that one of their participants, Angelica, “introduced her ethnic identity once she was sure others would not disapprove”. This example elucidates the power of external pressures to ethnic identification and the pressure to assimilate. Extending this concept of external pressure, Katz (1996), found that the Latino youth that she studied were faced with several choices: 1) They could internalize these negative image of their ethnicity as part of their cultural identity. 2) They could reject these negative images and build upon the positive associations created within their own ethnic group. 3) They could resist the stereotypes by turning them on their heads and slapping society’s faces with them (p. 610).

This attainment of these reasoning skills enables adolescents question their experiences with cultural customs, their ethnic heritage and engage in an active exploration of their ethnic identity, then finally reify and internalize an ethnic identity that is meaningful to them (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004; Torres & Baxter Madolda, 2004; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002).

Quite often, for youth who are born in the United States, yet whose parents are immigrants, that identity is one of biculturalism. In general, a bicultural identity leads to greater psychological health and positively related to positive self-esteem (Riojas Clark & Bustos Flores, 2001). Further, those individuals with a bicultural identity “can relate effectively to both their native and the U.S. cultures and that they feel less isolated from either culture” (Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002, p. 308). Language, more importantly the use of multiple languages, is an distinct feature of the development of a bicultural identity permitting individuals “to function in
multiethnic and multicultural environments” (Trueba, 2002, p. 11). Further, this use of multiple languages, the flexibility to interact across racial and ethnic boundaries, and a general resilience to endure hardships and overcome obstacles is, in Trueba’s (2002) view, will “clearly be recognized as a new cultural capital, not a handicap.” (p. 24). This ability to be flexible and overcome hardships is quite often linked to the presence of sources of support, in particular the family.

Those Latino adolescents who “may not have strong familial support systems may fare worse, in terms of ethnic identity, than Latino adolescents who have access to these resources.” (Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002, p. 317). These adolescents fare worse in terms of self-esteem and self-concept, which are important factors in academic achievement and to the formation of ethnic identity. The development of a positive ethnic identity is important because of its linkage to self-esteem. Self-esteem is often developed through comparing ourselves to the people around us, and unless minority youth are in the majority population, and they have an opportunity to develop a positive ethnic identity, their self-esteem may be lower than mainstream adolescents’ self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002).

However, there is evidence to the contrary. Other researchers have posited that socioeconomic status is a much more salient factor in the development of positive self-esteem than ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002). Further complicating the linkages between self-esteem and ethnic identity is the fact that “researchers in the area of racial identity are divided as to whether positive self-esteem is derived from strong feelings of group-belonging, or whether low self-esteem is a result of identification with a stigmatized social group” (Bracey, Bamaca, Umaña-Taylor, 2004, p. 124). Regardless, Bracey, Bamaca, and
Umaña-Taylor (2004) found in their research that “higher scores on ethnic identity were associated with higher scores on self-esteem” (p. 128).

This information on the importance of identity and its link to self-esteem has implications for educators. The educational system is the primary means of transmitting and maintaining Anglo-American culture and language. (Zimmerman, 2000). If a positive ethnic identity is an important component of self-esteem, then the maintenance of language as an important symbolic element of cultural identity (Ferdman, 1990; Zimmerman, 2000) and is an important goal of culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers must struggle with the fact that minority groups’ languages exist in a subordinate position to English which is related to notions of power and hegemony in the United States society (Garcia Bedolla, 2003). The challenge is to value the language of the learner, because it is important for their social and psychological development. Teachers must not only be aware of the ways language, culture, and ethnicity mediate the social construction of identity but also be aware that “the interactions of these constructs may affect the expectations they have of students” (Riojas Clark & Bustos Flores, 2001, p. 70). Being cognizant of students’ group membership is also to give value to their ethnic identity, or developing sense of an ethnic identity. Ferdman (1990) warns educators that treating everyone in the same manner “can result in the very inequities that are to be avoided” (p. 183). Students can be taught that there are multiple ways of being, speaking and interacting with the wider society (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 74). Students struggle with the complexities of negotiating and surviving the majority culture and can become alienated.

Zimmerman further (2000) asserts that bilingual programs can facilitate the bridge between the home, the school environment and engagement with the majority culture.

Moreover, Cummins, J., Bismilla, V., Chow, P., Cohen, S., Giampapa, F, Leoni, L, et al. (2005)
state that “by welcoming the student’s home language, schools facilitate the flow of knowledge, ideas, and feelings between home and school and across languages” (p. 42).

Bilingualism and biliteracy, then, become methods of honoring and developing ethnic identity and fostering self-esteem. In this context, the teaching of English literacy is more appropriately called “second language learning and use” (Skapoulli, 2004, p. 255) because the language may be used more strategically according to the navigation and participation in different cultural contexts. Bilingualism is an important goal because Latinos are “very aware of the value attached to each language, and how it affects the stereotypes of Latinos more generally.” (Garcia Bedolla, 2003, p. 275). Literacy in this context also takes on another meaning. In Ferdman’s (1990) view, “becoming literate means developing mastery not only over processes, but also over the symbolic media of the culture – they ways in which cultural values, beliefs, and norms are represented. Being literate implies actively maintaining contact with collective symbols and the processes by which they are represented.” (p. 188). In his definition, Ferdman does not define literacy as set of constant skills, but as a set of behaviors attached to someone who can understand and produce behaviors that “are seen as significant within a given culture” (Ferdman, 1990, p. 186). This, in essence, is biculturalism or multiculturalism.

Being able to speak ‘properly’ in a variety of contexts is an important feature of social integration in contexts where ethnicity becomes critical (Skapoulli, 2004, p. 246). Baez (2002) recalls that “by linking my inability to speak “properly” to my coming from Puerto Rico, they ensured that I would feel a great need to forget that, in fact, only 2 years before I had “gotten off the boat”. Note how effectively we were normalized into oppression by language” (p. 126). Garcia Berdola (2003) found in their research that the Spanish language was an important and
integral feature of ethnic identity, but the fact that the language is stigmatized and in a subordinate position to English negatively affected how Latinos viewed Spanish. The participants in her research indicated that “the reason why many of the 1st generation felt they were treated badly at work and in the community” (Garcia Bedolla, 2003, p. 273). As a result, as Baez (2002) so eloquently states, “language not only creates the contours of identity, it also may set up the conditions for other kinds of inclusion and exclusion” (Baez, p. 129).

For Latino youth, biliteracy development, in its traditional sense, in addition to Ferdman’s (1990) definition, is an important part of a culturally relevant education (Dorwin, 1998). Students’ self-esteem can be positively affected when the students believe themselves to be biliterate. Huang (1992) found in his research that Mexican-American 8th graders have a greater sense of self-esteem when they consider themselves biliterate than students who don’t see themselves as biliterate. No doubt these students are feeling a sense of accomplishment of being literate in two languages and also feel a sense of pride that they are also literate in their home language and can read culturally relevant materials, in which they see themselves reflected.

It is managing the conditions for exclusion and inclusion that becomes the challenge educators of diverse students, and in particular Latino immigrant youth. Literacy practices that develop a positive identity in Latino students are essential to self-esteem and, by extension, academic achievement. Educators, then, must create bilingual and bicultural contexts in which students can fully develop literacy, in particular Ferdman’s (1990) sense of literacy being the ability to successfully participate fully in a variety of contexts.
References


