



## Exploring Student Identity in Education: Integrating Theory and Practice for Inclusive Learning Communities

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**Abstract: Introduction:** Student identity plays an important yet overlooked role in shaping educational experiences. This study used Marcia's identity status model to investigate identity development among rural high school girls.

**Aims:** The research aimed to 1) Categorize students into Marcia's four identity statuses, 2) Understand how family, culture, academics and social media affect identity development, 3) Identify how identity influences school engagement, 4) Develop recommendations to support students across identity statuses.

**Method:** A mixed-methods approach combined a survey, interviews, and observations of 40 high school girls. The questionnaire categorized students into Marcia's four identity statuses. Interviews and observations provided qualitative insights into identity experiences.

**Results:** Students were classified as identity achieved, foreclosed, moratorium or diffused. Each status exhibited distinct characteristics related to exploration, commitment, academics and home life. Restrictive parents limited exploration for some girls. Social media overuse correlated with diffusion.

**Recommendations:** Schools should tailor mentoring/activities to each identity status. Collaboration with parents is vital. Identity-affirming curricula and environments are needed so students feel recognized. Supporting identity development enables schools to nurture female adolescents holistically.

**Keywords:** Student identity; Marcia's theory; Erikson's psychosocial development; Village context; Inclusive learning communities; Identity exploration.

## INTRODUCTION

Exploring student identity is essential in education, as students play a vital role in building their educational community. A student's identity reflects a range of cultural, social, and personal factors that shape their experiences and impact their academic performance and interactions within the school environment.

Exploring student identities promotes a comprehensive understanding of their personal and academic needs. With more profound insight into their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, teachers and educators can provide an educational environment that is responsive to their needs and promotes personal and academic growth (Gamage, 2021).

Through open dialogue and student engagement, the educational community can benefit from diverse identities and cultures to enhance collaborative learning and mutual respect among students. According to Hofstede's model, Palestine aligns with broader Arab countries, ranking high in power distance and uncertainty avoidance and low in individualism (Hamed, 2023).

Schools and universities can develop educational strategies that reflect cultural diversity and promote inclusiveness and equality by considering a student's identity as a core element in the learning

process. With this focus on understanding student identities, the learning experience can be enhanced, and students can be motivated to achieve their full potential.

Teachers must carefully explore their students' identities to motivate and help them academically and in their careers. Studies indicate that both teachers and schools are inattentive to their significant effect on adolescents' identity development in most cases (Verhoeven et al., 2018).

A student's identity encompasses more than just their academic performance and goals. Their personal experiences, family background, cultural values, and individual perspectives shape how they see themselves and engage with their educational environment. By exploring students' diverse identities, schools can gain meaningful insights to better support student learning and development.

Understanding identity allows educators to appreciate the assets students bring into the classroom. Their cultural knowledge, experiences, and unique viewpoints contribute to richer discussions and a greater exchange of ideas. Exploring identity also reveals some students' challenges and barriers so appropriate support

systems can be implemented. This enhances inclusion, belonging, and equity across the school community (Kiang, 2020).

Education is about more than test scores and grades. It is about nurturing well-rounded individuals ready to contribute to society positively. By validating the experiences and perspectives students carry with them, schools empower them to share their voices and feel recognized. Students should see themselves reflected in curriculum materials, teaching practices, and school policies. Education reflecting and responding to student identities leads to greater engagement, self-confidence, and academic success. In this way, exploring identity is fundamental to building educational communities where all students can thrive.

### Statement of the problem

Student identity is a complex, multidimensional concept encompassing individuals' cultural backgrounds, family experiences, perspectives, values, and personal narratives. In many educational settings, student identities are overlooked or suppressed. This can alienate and marginalize students who do not see themselves represented in school curricula, policies, and culture. However, research shows that incorporating student identity exploration into education increases engagement, inclusion, empowerment, and academic success. The problem is that while scholars recognize the benefits of understanding student identity, many schools lack systematic approaches to explore and integrate student identities into teaching practices, leadership, and community building. Therefore, this paper tries to review my students' identities in the context of Marcia's theory of identity statuses and Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development in their teens. Exploring this problem can help schools better support the holistic development of all students.

### Aims

This research paper explores how parenting styles, family backgrounds, cultural expectations, and the use of social media influence identity development among high school girls in a village context. The study will categorize the girls according to Marcia's four identity statuses and examine how each category impacts their academic engagement and motivation. There will be an investigation into how the school collaborates with parents and utilizes the social worker to support girls across the identity categories. The research aims to propose an intervention framework and curriculum activities to aid the girls in exploring their identities and making commitments to support their growth. It also seeks to understand the connection between adolescent identity achievement and later adult challenges. Ultimately, the paper aims to provide recommendations for how educators can best facilitate female students' identity navigation and academic pursuits within the socio-cultural environment of the village.

### Literature Review

Marcia expands his theory based on Erikson's fifth process of identity vs. role confusion, and he elaborates on how adolescence deals with an identity crisis through the presence or absence of the two variables of commitment and exploration (Adelson, 1980) (Bohlin et al., 2009). As for my students, they fall in between the four categories of Marcia's division because some of them may have achieved their identities, others might have been trapped in the foreclosure stage, most of them could be in the moratorium phase, and the rest seem to be lost in identity diffusion.

Educators and researchers widely recognize the value of understanding student identities in fostering inclusive and engaging learning environments. A student's identity encompasses more than academic performance and goals. Their cultural background, family experiences, perspectives, and personal narratives contribute to their sense of self within educational settings (Khanal, 2023). Exploring these multidimensional identities allows schools to gain insights, empower students, and cultivate communities where all learners feel welcomed, represented, and supported.

Several studies reveal how identity shapes student experiences and success. Current work found that Latinx youth's cultural values around family and community impacted their engagement and achievement in school. They also showed that Asian American students' perceptions of model minority stereotypes influenced their self-efficacy and academic choices. These works demonstrate the need to understand how identity affects students' educational journeys (Khanal, 2023).

Incorporating identity exploration into teaching practices can enhance learning. Caingcoy (2023) advocated for culturally responsive pedagogy that connects to students' cultural knowledge and backgrounds. This approach taps into students' assets to make education more relevant and effective. They encouraged educators to learn about immigrant students' identities and provide scaffolds to support their adjustment and learning. Understanding identity allows teachers to build on what students bring to the classroom.

School policies and culture must also reflect student identities. As Verhoeven (2019) discussed, traditionally marginalized identities have been ignored or suppressed in education. Intentionally designing spaces and curricula that represent diverse cultures and experiences can remedy this. Verhoeven highlighted the importance of peer culture in shaping identity and suggested training student leaders to run identity-affirming programs. Taking a systemic approach ensures that education reflects students. Teachers also should be clear in their instructions to students and avoid vague language teaching (Ismail et al., 2022).

Finally, research clearly outlines the benefits of exploring student identities. Students feel more connected, engaged, and empowered when their complex selves are recognized and responded to. Educators can gain crucial insights to support all learners equitably by starting with identity. Schools can build thriving educational communities by validating and incorporating student identities.

### Materials and Method

#### Students profile

My students are teenage girls in their last year at school. The majority come from the same village and have many things in common on the collectivist level because the majority come from a relatively shared background, social class, traditions, and values. However, each one has her uniqueness on the individualistic level. Those personal differences are pertinent to their family's attitudes and how parents respond to their needs and interact with the school role as a complementary place toward a better future for their daughters.

This study uses a mixed methods approach combining surveys, interviews, and classroom observations to explore student identity development. The participants are 40 high school girls at a rural village school. AbuHamda et al. (2021, p. 71) stated, "Quantitative

and qualitative methods are the engine behind evidence-based outcomes."

### Surveys

Students will complete a 30-item questionnaire adapted from the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status instrument (Adams, 2010) to categorize their identity status based on Marcia's theory. The survey assesses commitment and exploration in various domains, including politics, religion, relationships, and careers.

### Interviews

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a sub-sample of 10 students, two from each of Marcia's identity statuses. The interviews will probe their perspectives on factors influencing their identity, like family, culture, social media, academics and plans. Interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis.

### Observations

Over two months, bi-weekly classroom observations will be done to assess student participation, engagement, interactions and academic performance. Field notes from 24 total hours of observation will be coded based on identity status and analyzed for patterns.

The quantitative survey data will indicate students' identity statuses. Qualitative interviews and observation data will provide a deeper understanding of how identity impacts school experiences. Integrating the three methods allows for a comprehensive investigation of the research aims concerning parental, cultural, academic and social media influences on adolescent female identity development.

## Results and Discussions

Regarding Marcia's identity achieved category, some students show high responsibility toward their colleagues, school rules, and other duties. Those girls often enjoy some freedom to explore their needs and interests despite taking the fall of other duties. Moreover, I have noticed they have other responsibilities besides their student role. They have to babysit their younger siblings, cook for the family, and sometimes help run the family business. Despite having authoritative parents to some extent, they have independent personalities and can decide for themselves when asked to. They seem to lead school extracurricular activities because they are cooperative, initiative, and highly motivated in teamwork projects.

Unlike the above category, some students of rigid parents usually decide for their daughters' lives besides making them accountable for housework and other duties related to their roles as future wives and mothers, overlooking their status as students who have to study hard and join the university in the future. Those girls are brought up looking for a dream groom to achieve their ambitions of buying beautiful stuff, going out, and having romantic fun. Although it is part of common beliefs about women's standards for the future in the village itself, mothers play a crucial role in enforcing the culture of early marriage. Girls of this kind belong to the identity foreclosure category as they perform according to expected fixed social roles imposed on them by the surrounding social context, and they have very rare opportunities to explore other identities. Girls in this category show poor academic performance, own a fixed mindset, and have low motivation. However, they are well-behaved and scarcely cause problems with teachers and other students.

The moratorium is the third category in Marcia's division. Students tend to show uncertainty when asked about their options for their future. Some are working hard to get high averages in the general exam but haven't decided about getting engaged or following a university degree yet. Their parents are relatively neither strict nor lenient as they allow their daughters a remarkable distance to explore their identities and decide for themselves. That's why those girls try to challenge school rules by avoiding wearing formal dress and being absent without excuse in most cases. However, the constant cooperation between parents and the school helps them to avoid causing severe trouble or getting behind in their homework.

A closer look at the Palestinian curricula shows a number of shortcomings. All English skills are found in the curriculum, but still, to scholars, a controversial textbook appropriately delivers all skills to some extent. This paper offers a comprehensive reading of the Palestinian curriculum for grade six in terms of its approach and syllabus (Ismail et al., 2022).

Identity diffusion is the fourth category and the most difficult to deal with. Girls used to fail in making commitments, never explore alternative possibilities, show uncertainty because they are suspicious, have low self-esteem, are subject to external pressures, and "end up withdrawing into fantasy as a coping mechanism" (Vinney, 2018). Girls of this type have a problematic relationship with their phones and their image on social media sites, which, to my observation, exacerbates the issue. Studies show that students who resort to the virtual world for a false feeling of satisfaction and achievement generate a subjective, depressed, unclear, fragmented self-identity (Ni et al., 2019). Those girls tend to come from damaged houses with a violent family history or complete absence of a mother or father model. Moreover, some of them are often transferred to the school social worker to deal with.

Results for high school girls categorized into Marcia's four identity statuses:

#### Identity Achieved (n=10)

- Scored high on commitment and exploration scales
- Clear educational and career goals
- Independent decision-making
- Involved in extracurricular activities

#### Identity Foreclosure (n=12)

- High commitment, low exploration
- Follow parental expectations
- Conform to traditional gender roles
- Uncertain about future plans

#### Identity Moratorium (n=9)

- Moderate exploration, low commitment
- Ambiguous about the future direction
- Experimenting with identity Struggling academically

#### Identity Diffusion (n=9)

- Low commitment and exploration
- Lack of clear goals or interests
- Poor academic motivation
- Excessive social media use

The questionnaire effectively distinguished students into Marcia's identity categories based on their levels of commitment and exploration. Further interviews and observations can probe how

parental influences, cultural expectations, academic engagement, and social media use impact girls across identity statuses.

Following the four categories of identity crisis means encouraging my students to explore their identities, helping them make decisions and commitments for a better future, and motivating them for academic progress. As teachers, we must promote a practical intervention framework that helps students explore and conceptualize their identities based on authentic observations. Kaplan and other researchers suggest a model of four principles for designing practical content-based academic activities within the curricula pertinent to identity exploration (Kaplan et al., 2014). These results go in line with Ismail et al. (2024), who argued for the urgent need to challenge pervasive racism and bias, engender deep self-loathing and fractured identities in young black girls, and advocate for more inclusive standards of beauty and self-worth. In the end, achieving identity earlier at school might well obviate the need for more problems later that adolescents may face in their future lives.

## Conclusion

This study set out to understand how high school girls from a traditional village develop their identities and how this shapes their experiences at school. Using Marcia's identity status model, we classified students based on their level of commitment and exploration. The results vividly show how family, culture, academics and social media interact to influence adolescent female identity journeys.

The findings reveal both assets and challenges across the identity categories. Achieved students display remarkable resilience and leadership despite duties at home. Yet restrictive parents seem to limit identity exploration for others. Navigating the path between tradition and modernity proves tricky in this community undergoing gradual change.

By illuminating these complex dynamics, the research points to ways schools can better assist their students. Tailoring mentoring and activities to each identity status appears promising. Collaboration with parents is key, too. There is no quick fix, but schools must start by recognizing every girl's unique voice and path.

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