

Identity: Understanding Stories

Robert Q. Berry III
University of Virginia

Learning and knowing the stories of people provides insight into their identities. Much of my work has focused on Black learners' mathematics identities. The mathematics identities of these learners overlapped significantly with early identification with college attendance and careers. This early identification is crucial because it serves as a source of strength and motivation to do well in mathematics. For example, in Berry (2008), Andre, a Black boy, stated, "I want to go to the Air Force Academy and become a pilot. You have to be good at math to get into the Academy." Similarly, Clayton, another Black boy, stated, "Good math grades will get me into college." Knowing these Black boys' stories provides insight into how they see the world and how they think the world sees them.

Stories provide the context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting identities, which gives *voice* for people in announcing to the world who they think they are, who they see themselves becoming, how others see them, and how they act as a result of these understandings, feeling, and interpretations. Voice is identity—having a sense of self, a sense of purpose, and a sense of relationship to others. Identity is a dynamic and context-driven construct that changes, grows, and evolves.

In the context of mathematics teaching and learning, understanding the strengths and motivations that serve to develop learners' identities should be embedded in teachers' daily work (Aguirre et al., 2013). Mathematics teaching involves helping learners develop mathematical skills and understanding and empowering them to see themselves capable of participating in and being doers of mathematics. Understanding learners' identities gives teachers insight into how and why some learners use mathematics to examine personal, communal, and social contexts. Using the Black boys' stories (Berry, 2008), I learned that as these boys identified themselves as smart and good at mathematics, they enacted behaviors and actions of smartness. In doing so, they enacted a sense of mathematical agency. Simply put, agency is their identity in action. For them, agency was about participating in mathematics in personally and socially meaningful ways.

This monograph's work suggests that researchers and teachers must commit to knowing and understanding learners' identities, histories, experiences, and cultural contexts. Engaging in identity work for people who have been historically excluded requires a critical lens for understanding the use of language and the intentions of policies. Throughout this monograph, we are invited to take on a critical perspective when examining identity through the lens of race, gender, and intersectionality. This use of a critical lens centers on the use of language when discussing the identities of people and communities. We must be mindful of policies that create incentives for "seeing" learners and communities in deficit ways. Too often, the identity language in policies formalizes deficit language. Terms

like “at-risk,” “proficient,” “below grade-level,” and “gifted” provide particular ways of *seeing* learning, often in deficit ways. This monograph humanizes the connections among identity, policies, and research. Unpacking the stories of people and communities and stories embedded in policy language using a critical lens is essential to humanizing and seeing the perspectives of people and communities. Although this monograph contains many important takeaways, I name three broad takeaways for researchers, teachers, and policymakers who engage in identity work.

1. Know and understand how their own identities, histories, experiences, and cultural contexts influence their research and interactions with learners. Researchers and teachers might engage communities and families to consider incorporating multiple contexts into their research and teaching.
2. Develop a critical equity lens about culture and difference. Researchers and teachers imagine how mathematics and school experiences might differ across students with different histories, experiences, and cultural contexts.
3. Look for and study learners from different histories, experiences, and cultural contexts. These stories provide multiple perspectives of identity development.

References

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