Finding Yourself in School:
A Literature Review Through the Thematic Lenses of Identity and Music

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Abstract

This article introduces the psychosocial construct of identity development and surveys the current best practices for identity formation in youth who are vulnerable to identity problems. Solutions reviewed include alternative schools; school-based prevention; school bonding; social and emotional learning; and a particular focus on the use of music. Literature in each of these areas is investigated and used to argue for the increased integration of therapeutic music education in schools to facilitate identity development.

Introduction

> I didn't fit in at my high school. I didn't have the same interests as people—like I didn't want to play sports, and I didn't want to be a cheerleader, and I didn't want to go to after-school clubs. I just wanted to go home and listen to my stereo or go to concerts. . . I just never felt like I fit in (Currie, 2004, quoting study participant, p. 113).

In his popular book, *The Road to Whatever*, Currie (2004) noted that many youth who are disengaged in school drop out because they do not find it relevant. *Finding yourself* can be difficult, especially when student interests are not reflected in the school curriculum. Schools often provide a uniform environment and do not encourage students to experiment with ideas and identities (Kroger, 2007). The difficulties experienced in adolescence by many youth are usually related to disadvantage, social marginalization, and racism (Erikson,1968). However, like the girl whose comments prefaced this article, many adolescents who are not stereotypically disadvantaged may still have trouble finding themselves and forming their identities.

Who, then, are the adolescents who feel they do not fit in; who cannot find themselves; who are having difficulty with life? How *do* they find themselves? And what can educators do to help? In this article, I explore these questions via a review and analysis of the relevant literature through the thematic lens of *identity* and *music*. Literature-based solutions reviewed include those related to alternative schools, school-based prevention, school bonding, social and emotional learning, and a particular focus on the use of music.

Literature Review

In this section, I discuss the theories that underpin the review of the literature and the ensuing recommendations for best practices. These theories are *identity development*, as seen through the lens of psychosocial theory; and *focal theory*, as it relates to vulnerable youth. I then examine the various evidence-based interventions that have proven successful in helping students achieve academically, and apply them to identity development.

Identity Development

Erikson's (1959) analysis of identity development continues to dominate research on identity in adolescence. Although identity has since been conceptualized as more fluid and "constructed" (Kearney, 2003), and adulthood is now often seen as preceded by a period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007), Erikson's psychosocial theory retains its popularity. According to Erikson, *ego identity*, a psychosocial construct, develops and changes over the life cycle through eight stages of conflicts to be resolved. In adolescence, the conflict is *identity versus role confusion*:

> Youth after youth, bewildered by the incapacity to assume a role forced on him by the inexorable standardization of American adolescence, runs away in one form or another, dropping out of school, leaving jobs, staying out all night, or withdrawing into bizarre and inaccessible moods… (Erikson, 1968, p. 132)

Though Erikson did not operationalize these stages, his work was furthered by Marcia (1966), a developmental psychologist who devised a model and interview instrument that distinguishes four types of *identity status*. These identity status types include *identity diffusion* (identity has not yet been considered), *foreclosure* (parental values are accepted without personal evaluation), *moratorium* (identity is actively sought and confirmed), and *identity achievement* (the identity crisis is resolved). Marcia's model provided impetus for an estimated 500 studies (Sneed, Schwartz, & Cross, 2006), starting in the US and Canada in the 1970s and spreading worldwide over the next four decades. Most investigations confirmed that Marcia's methodology supported Erikson's model (e.g., Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996; Kroger, 1996; Noom, Dekovic, & Meeus, 1999; Phinney, 2003).

Willemsen and Waterman (1991) reported that *diffused* youth tend to be influenced by peer pressure, often avoid issues, and feel hopeless and lonely. Diffused adolescents have the least parental emotional attachment and have restricted independence. Archer and Waterman (1994) suggested that *foreclosed* individuals can be inflexible, defensive, and are the least able to integrate ideas and think analytically. Foreclosure often results from strong relationships with parents and consequently limited individuation. Kroger (2004) noted that adolescents in moratorium, who are searching for themselves, are usually the most anxious. They commonly have close relationships with friends and are prone to ambivalence towards their families. Youth in the moratorium and diffusion groups often move to a different identity status within a year. *Identity achievers* have the highest degree of moral reasoning, have deep relationships with friends and a partner, plan rationally when decision-making, and have higher levels of self-esteem and motivation to achieve (Kroger, 2004).

Secure family relationships encouraging independence have been found to best support identity achievement (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Furthermore, the literature shows that identity is rarely achieved before the age of 18, each identity status does not have to occur to lead to identity achievement, and statuses do not always follow in the same order (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). In addition, males and females seem to experience the same phases of exploration and commitment and achieve identity at about the same time (Archer, 1994).

Educational Best Practices for Identity Development

When adolescents are moving through diffusion and moratorium— oriented towards peers, self-conscious, desiring autonomy— they need a socially safe yet intellectually motivating setting (Roker & Banks, 1993). This can be achieved by implementing several practices. According to Eccles and Roeser (2003), best practices in schools serving adolescents include skills based on inquiry and communication instead of memorization; grading based on progress instead of normative performance; student groupings based on interests instead of ability; instruction accommodating a variety of strengths and learning styles; activities that are hands-on, relevant, and promote autonomy; and relationships that are positive and supportive.

In my experiences as an elementary, secondary, and college teacher for over 20 years, I have observed that while some of these practices have been adopted, the default seems to be to teach as one has been taught. Thus, the old paradigm of memorization; normative grading; and lecturing continues, especially at secondary and college levels, to the detriment of numerous adolescents. However, while many youth encounter challenges during adolescence, most do not experience a crisis (Coleman, 1978).

Coleman took a sociological approach in establishing focal theory, noting that changes in adolescence lead to problems if stressors occur together or in rapid succession. Young people from a disadvantaged background— faced with poverty, racism, or a single parent home— are more likely to be at risk for school failure, teenage pregnancy, substance misuse, and delinquency. They often lack nurturing parents, report physical or sexual abuse, are depressed, and drop out of school. In an international collection of studies on adolescence, Rutter (1995) acknowledged that this is a global plight. A Statistics Canada report (Gilmore, 2010) cited the school dropout rate in 2010 as 8.5%, including 22.6% among Aboriginal youth. Santrock (2007) reported that the U.S. dropout rate for 2001 was 10.7%, including 27% of 16 to 24-year-old Latino youth and 90% of Native American youth.

Consistent with focal theory, these youth are struggling with many problems and are likely to have difficulty during adolescence. For youth in minority groups, examining their ethnic identity— often in response to discrimination— is essential in achieving identity. Commitment to exploring ethnic identity engenders a sense of ethnic pride, belonging, and confidence. For example, in a study of African-American and mixed race adolescents, McMahon and Watts (2002) observed that ethnic identity achievement is related to stronger coping skills and fewer aggressive beliefs and behaviours. Ethnic identity formation was also related to decreased adolescent drug use in American Indians (Kulis, Napoli & Marsiglia, 2002) and identified as a predictor of social adaptation and emotional adjustment in African-American adolescents (Yasui, Dorham & Dishion, 2004). Dornbusch (1994) reported that the incorrect assignment of average-ability minority youth to low-ability classes within a vocational, rather than a college-bound, curricular track contributed to students leaving school. Incorrect tracking assignment was related to racially biased implementation.

Franklin and Streeter (1995) noted that students who are likely to fail or drop out are a diverse group. In addition to the economically and socially disadvantaged, many middle-class, high-achieving youth are vulnerable. Their data suggested three main reasons: failing at least one class, school authority problems, and truancy. These reasons are related to socioemotional issues. Failing when one has a history of high achievement often indicates difficulty interacting with a teacher, authority problems infer issues with power, and truancy is associated with a lack of connection to the school (Franklin & Streeter, 1995). In a Canadian study, most male dropouts said they left school because they were bored, not interested, or had been suspended or expelled. Females cited family issues as a factor, such as childcare needs (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002). Husted and Cavalluzzo (2001) reported that students who are unmotivated, unhappy, and underachieving often feel a sense of social disengagement from school. How have these issues been addressed? Following are the major approaches and interventions that have successfully mitigated school disengagement, behavioral problems, and drug use.

School-based Interventions for Disengagement, Behavioral Problems, and Drug Use

Prevatt and Kelly (2003) observed that most intervention programs have focused on academics, psychosocial skills, mentoring, and parent-teacher relationships. Studies have found that alternative schools are considered to best serve youth who have encountered academic failure and those with behavioral, learning, or emotional difficulties. Parallel to these conclusions, a meta-analysis of 165 studies on school-based methods aimed at prevention for truancy, behaviour problems, and drug use (Wilson, Gottfredson & Najaka, 2001) found the following practices optimum: counselling and mentoring; goal setting; establishing high expectations; social skills modelling with rehearsal and feedback; prompts to ensure competent behaviour; and multi-year, multi-component programs.

In a US study on adolescents in treatment for substance abuse, Currie (2004) discovered that after Native Amercians, white youth were at the highest risk for illegal drug use, and they were at the highest risk of any ethnic group for binge drinking; smoking; and prescription drug abuse. They were also at higher risk for suicide or auto accidents than Blacks or Hispanics. Currie concluded that parents and institutions expect mainstream young people to succeed at life's challenges, and if they do not, it is often assumed that it is the youth's fault. Most of the adolescents he interviewed had little support at home and did not feel they belonged at school. Similarly, a Statistics Canada report (Tjepkema, 2004) found that 2.7% of 15- to 19-year-olds were dependent on illicit drugs, and 5.6% were dependent on alcohol. While ethnicity was not specified, 8.8% were from low to middle income households and 6.2% were from middle to high income families, suggesting that Canadian mainstream youth may be comparably at risk.

Jones (1994) investigated identity development and adolescent problem behaviours. He found that diffused youth are three to five times more likely to use and abuse substances than foreclosed youth. The diffused use substances to cope with stress and boredom, while the foreclosed drink alcohol mainly at family functions. Achieved and moratorium youth use substances more than foreclosures. The achieved use substances to socialize and moratoriums do so out of curiosity. Jones noted that curricula intended to address specific issues (e.g. substance use, school dropout) have been largely ineffective, and have been replaced with cognitive and skill-based approaches. He suggested that successful school-based interventions should focus on youths' underlying problems, rather than the resulting behaviour.

He, like Erikson, maintained that earlier developmental issues, i.e., trust; autonomy; initiative; and industry must be addressed before identity can be achieved. Jones noted that diffused youth are most likely to have unsuccessfully dealt with these issues, and they can benefit from strategies designed to improve problem-solving; decision-making; and coping. Kroger (2004) observed that most youth who have difficulty establishing identity are diffused, and they need opportunities to explore their unique interests and talents. Kroger also advised educators to support moratorium youth by providing curricula corresponding to their needs, including the study of sexuality; vocational skills instruction; and providing work experience to investigate various job possibilities. She suggested that educators could best support those who are foreclosed by providing job exploration in a safe and structured environment.

Fortunately, most of the young people Currie (2004) interviewed eventually extricated themselves from drugs and despair. He saw two factors at work: the youth began to think about themselves differently, and there was a way for them to put this new self-image into practice. Putting self-image, or identity, into practice is identity achievement. For the youth in Currie's study to make this leap, they needed someone or something to serve as a catalyst to help them see who they were and what they were capable of doing. A feeling of acceptance and belonging in school can be this catalyst.

Research in the area of school bonding, including a feeling of membership; respect; and support, suggests that a sense of belonging is a protective factor against drug use (Napoli, Marsiglia & Kulis, 2003). Simmons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, and Saylor (1999) discovered that several practices have been effective, suc as changing classroom and school environments to meet student needs; teaching social skills; and getting parents involved in the school. They also ascertained that students who feel affiliated with their school by early adolescence have more academic success and are less likely to have conduct and antisocial behaviour issues.

Another intervention incorporating social components is *Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL), a recent development in school programming intended for all students. SEL involves teaching skills such as recognizing and managing emotions, effectively solving problems, and establishing positive relationships (Zins & Elias, 2006). SEL developed from research on resilience and emotional intelligence and is evidence-based, with outcomes including more pro-social behaviour; improved problem-solving and planning; a better sense of community; and fewer absences and suspensions (Zins & Elias, 2006). While SEL has not been studied for correlation with identity development, these outcomes mirror attributes seen in identity achievers.

Finding Yourself in School Through Music

Sometimes even the abovementioned solutions are not enough. For Erikson's artistic-humanistic youth, creativity and depth of meaning are missing at school. Holloway and LeCompte (2001) found that participation in school arts programs allows adolescents to experiment with different identities, to have meaningful interactions with adults, to express themselves and release emotions, and to feel increased self-worth. Blomfield and Barber (2011) reported that extracurricular arts and sports activities are linked with higher academic achievement, a greater sense of belonging, less alcohol and drug use, and decreased absenteeism. In a Dutch study, Selfhout, Branje, Ter Bogt, and Meeus (2009) affirmed that music is central in adolescence, both socially and personally, and that peers often share music preferences. Canadian adolescent friends have also been found to share music preferences (Miranda & Claes, 2009). North and Hargreaves (2008) discovered that favourite songs reflect youths' feelings, that many youth find moral and social guidance in music, and that the average adolescent listens to 10,500 hours of music between grades 7–12. Since the advent of rock and roll, popular music has been about, for, and by youth, and adolescents relate to the lyrics and feel that the music is theirs.

In a study on American adolescents' use of music in their daily lives, Larson (1995) provided pagers to almost 500 fifth to ninth graders for a week and asked them to report on their activities and emotional states when called at random times. The pre-adolescents were happy most of the time, which Larson thought reflected an unquestioning acceptance of who they are, as well as parental protection from worry. He noticed that:

> As they enter adolescence, however, this naïve, stable happiness appears to come apart; for some, the bottom falls out. Numerous studies show adolescence to be associated with increasing rates of depression, eating disorders, suicide, and delinquency. . . Because they do not have a stable internal sense of self, aversive events appear to be more disruptive to adolescents' than preadolescents' hour-to-hour emotional states. (pp. 538–539)

Larson postulated that stress increases in the lives of adolescents at the same time as they are distancing themselves from parents, resulting in fragmentation and emotional pain. He noticed that many of these youth used music to help develop their identity via demarcating separation from parents, establishing solidarity with peers, regulating emotions, and facilitating exploration of possible selves. Tarrant, North, and Hargreaves (2002) suggested that music appeals to adolescents because it addresses developmental issues, including developing emotional independence from parents; establishing peer relationships; becoming socially responsible; and acquiring new beliefs and values.

The emergence of music therapy in schools has allowed vulnerable youth to confront these developmental issues through music. Music therapists have traditionally practiced with populations with special needs, such as those with developmental disabilities or dementia, but during the past two decades they have also worked more frequently with youth at risk (Duerksen & Darrow, 1991). Music therapy is a process used to restore, improve, or maintain wellbeing; however, it becomes educational when the participants gain skills or content found in the music curriculum (Bruscia, 1989). Derrington (2005), a British music therapist working in a mainstream school, showed that songwriting allows youth to discuss difficult issues, since lyrics can be less direct than conversation, and that group songwriting can increase confidence and

independence, changing negative interactions into positive ones through a shared process involving listening and supporting.

Austin (2007), an American music therapist helping inner city youth, has used rap as a means of personal disclosure and affirmation. She observed that identity in adolescence is mutable, and that these young people often have difficulty with identity formation since they have not completed the earlier stages of development and their basic needs have not been met; this would identify them as diffused. She realized that music can serve as a constant, unlike the familial relationships these youth have experienced, and favourite songs can be played as needed for comfort and security. Austin found that adolescents' preferred songs often mirror hidden thoughts and feelings, which can be discussed and made clear, while identification with a singer can help strengthen a sense of self and foster peer relationships. The use of popular music can help adolescents "increase self-awareness, build self-esteem, strengthen their identities and solidify their connection to others" (Austin, 2007, p. 94). Buchanan (2000), a music therapist working in a Canadian alternative school, found that active music-making is a means to allow youth an appropriate method of venting frustration and anger. She also noted that group music activities foster relationships and respect for others, and that disclosure and self-awareness occur as relationships develop. This indicates identity achievement is occurring.

Recommendations

While budget constraints limit the presence of music therapists in Canadian schools, music educators can integrate these methods into their programs. Music educators, like music therapists, are involved in the musical and personal development of youth, and they use music to help motivate them. Many music therapy activities and strategies can be adapted by music educators, e.g., basing music experiences on adolescents' music preferences, abilities, and needs; choosing rewarding learning activities that assure success; developing trust, group identification, and cohesion through cooperative learning activities; accommodating individuals of varying ability; using songwriting as a form of self-expression; facilitating group interaction through music; and using music-listening to facilitate stress management (Duerksen & Darrow, 1991).

Music educators in the United Kingdom are already using these techniques. One of the most successful approaches is the development of student rock and pop bands. In a study of a large UK music education program called *Musical Futures*, Green (2008) experimented with informal learning that usually occurs outside of school. Many adolescents play rock music with their peers in garage or basement bands. The youth in Green's study formed friendship groups, brought in music of their choice, and worked together to listen to and learn to play songs. They also wrote songs with their peers or community musicians. The teachers served as resources when needed. The adolescents far preferred informal learning to their former music classes in terms of autonomy and choice of instrument and music, and they became competent musicians (Green, 2008). The activities these youth were engaged in were similar to those used by music therapist Buchanan.

Another possibility for adapting music therapy techniques to the classroom involves an interdisciplinary approach. School counsellors might work with music educators to provide therapeutic support. A team strategy would model collaborative values and mentorship. Counsellors might also independently use lyric writing, music listening, and discussion of favourite songs to provide motivation and efficacy in group sessions.

Secondary school-level band and vocal curriculum is often seen as outdated. In another UK study, Burnard (2008) interviewed exceptional music teachers who had successfully re-engaged disaffected youth in disadvantaged areas of England. Burnard cited a debate in the literature claiming that artistic practices are exclusionary, and reports that the music curriculum is regularly seen as limited and dull. However, the teachers in this study used collaborative approaches; current music; and new technology to involve and inspire the students. One teacher saw himself as empowering the adolescents, allowing them to discard their negative reputations. Another teacher invited fellow musicians to work with the youth on creative projects, building a sense of community and partnership. A third teacher used computer-based software to engage the

youth and promoted peer leadership. Burnard concluded that these educators fostered respect and recognition and reframed the teacher role.

Teachers in alternative school programs also implement these practices. Integrating these objectives with music activities can assist adolescents through the process of identity achievement and the accompanying developmental tasks, from determining one's beliefs to becoming responsible and independent. Canadian music educators could adopt these approaches to learning by allowing students more choice and control over the material they learn and more independence in the way they go about learning. This focus might provide a medium for creative students to engage in school curricula and promote identity achievement.

Best practices, alternative schools, school-based prevention practices, school bonding, and social and emotional learning are helping vulnerable youth achieve identity. However, for many adolescents, identity and music are inextricably connected. Through music, *finding themselves* in school might prove to be a little easier.

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