

Unveiling Student Identity: Understanding and Nurturing the Student of the 21st Century

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Abstract

In the 21st century, understanding the diverse identities of students is crucial for enabling and advancing their success in educational settings. The method followed in this paper involved intersectionality as a theoretical framework and methodological tool, incorporating analysis and systematic review of electronic databases, as well as relevant peer-reviewed and edited articles. The importance of recognizing and embracing student identity as a fundamental aspect of effective education is explored, highlighting the evolving nature of student demographics, emphasizing the need to move beyond traditional categorizations and stereotypes to truly understand the complexities of who our students are today. The multifaceted dimensions of student identity are explored, encompassing factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic background, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, and more. It emphasizes that student identity is not static but fluid, acknowledging the intersections and interplay of various aspects within an individual's identity. Furthermore, the implications of student identity on educational practices, pedagogy, curriculum, and support systems are explored. This paper emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that validate and celebrate students' diverse identities, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. It discusses the role of cultural responsiveness and equity in addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by different student groups. Drawing on research and best practices, this paper highlights the benefits of adopting student-centered approaches that acknowledge and build upon the strengths, experiences, and perspectives students bring to the learning process. It emphasizes the significance of promoting inclusive dialogue, cultural exchange, and collaborative learning opportunities that encourage students to embrace their identities, respect others, and develop critical thinking skills. In conclusion, by recognizing and embracing student identity, institutions and educators can create educational environments that cultivate all students' holistic development and success in the 21st century.

Keywords: student identity, 21st century, student, institutions, student support, intersectionality

Introduction

The educational landscape has evolved significantly in recent years, and one of the most prominent shifts has been toward student-centered approaches. These approaches prioritize the role of the learner in the educational process, acknowledging their unique

strengths, experiences, and perspectives emanating from their multiple identities. As educators in institutions of higher learning, it is important to know and understand the multiple identities of our students to contribute meaningfully to their educational journey, as well as to understand their challenges and privileges. This paper delves into the myriad benefits of embracing such methodologies in educational settings.

The following research questions guided this paper:

- What are the multiple identities of the 21st-century students? and
- Why is it important to understand these multiple identities?

In answering these questions, MacKinnon's (2013) views on intersectionality as a crucial methodology for understanding and addressing social inequality were followed, incorporating intersectional analysis with particular focus on structural intersectionality, as well as a systematic review of electronic databases and relevant peer-reviewed and edited articles. The search also included conference proceedings, original research, literature reviews, comments, opinion letters, etc. We built a keyword list for searching and organized it using Boolean logic.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, the researchers used the intersectional identity theory as a lens for viewing the students of the 21st century. This theory was first coined by Kimberl  Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality is a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by several discriminations and disadvantages, taking into account people's overlapping identities and experiences to understand the complexities of prejudices and privileges they face (Kort, 2019).

Intersectionality has mainly been used in gender studies (Nash, 2008). However, scholars from other fields have begun to adapt it to their research (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013) and it is beginning to gain traction in inclusive education (Artiles et al., 2016). This approach allowed the researchers to consider all characteristics and or identity markers of the students, which shed light on the many ways that they identify and think of themselves as well as how others, including educators, identify and think of them and how the intersection of these identities affect the way they confront their lives. The intersectionality framework facilitates our understanding of how social identities such as race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and gender overlap with one another and with systems of power that oppress and advantage people in institutions and broader communities (Kraus et al., 2017). Intersectionality also helps us understand the spaces that students occupy as a function of their unique personal and social identity configurations (Collins, 2019; Harris & Patton, 2019).

Additionally, the intersectional framework calls for the adoption of inclusive education to identify multiple factors that lead to discriminatory processes in institutions toward different student groups (Be i  et al., 2020). Intersectionality broadens the scope for the successful implementation of inclusive education, which not only focuses on disability but also on the multiple identity markers that students have (Be i  et al., 2020). Garcia and Ortiz (2013) argue that individuals found to have a disability also have another identity marker recognized by society that could marginalize them more than their disability. For example, students could come from racial minorities and low-income households, or their home language might be different from the dominant language spoken at the institution. It is therefore important that educators become aware and

recognize the “simultaneous” intersection between race, class, gender, (dis)ability, language abilities, and national origins. All of these need to be considered when unpacking and making decisions based on students’ identities and how to ensure that they get support and benefit from educational offerings.

Kort (2019) cautions that defining our students through singular aspects of their identity can be harmful and misleading. Considering the multiple facets that students assume in their lives, it is only proper to consider them as having multiple identities. Intersectional identity theory will therefore appropriately conceptualize the 21st-century students’ identity. Looking through the intersectional identity theory’s lens, we are enabled to appreciate and understand our 21st-century students as individuals, groups of people bound together by social problems as affected by several challenges, discrimination, and disadvantages (Kort, 2019). The intersectional identity theory highlights that students are often disadvantaged or privileged by multiple sources.

What are the multiple identities of the 21st-century students?

The identities of 21st-century students are complex and multifaceted, shaped by various factors including cultural background, socioeconomic status, personal interests, and digital engagement. 21st-century students were born into a media-saturated world, and their lives are immersed in technologies, from cell phones, iPods, handheld gaming devices, and PDAs, and are, as such, identified as Digital Natives (Martzoukou et al., 2020). These students will normally gravitate towards skills needed to use software or operate digital devices. They are dynamic and are also continuously involved in keeping up with new practices and technologies.

21st-century students are also global citizens, because of increasing globalization, they are exposed to diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives, leading to a sense of global citizenship and interconnectedness (Collins, 2019). The other identity assumed by these students is that of being multicultural individuals, as they come from multicultural backgrounds, blending elements of different cultures into their identities and enriching the diversity of their communities (Miller & Collette, 2019). They are lifelong learners, as well as social activists, continuously acquiring new skills and knowledge. With access to information and social media, students are actively involved in advocating for social justice, environmental sustainability, and other important causes.

Furthermore, some students exhibit entrepreneurial spirit, leveraging their creativity and problem-solving skills to innovate and create new opportunities, thus becoming entrepreneurs and innovators (Hayter et al., 2021). Another identity amongst our students is fluidity as they see greater acceptance and exploration of diverse identities, including gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, leading to more fluid and inclusive conceptions of self (Rupp et al., 2022). Our students are also multitaskers as they juggle multiple roles and responsibilities, balancing academics, extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, and personal interests. They are also community contributors who are actively involved in their communities, volunteering, participating in civic activities, and making positive contributions to society. As they prepare for their future careers, students often identify with professional aspirations and goals, seeking to develop the skills and experiences necessary for success in their chosen fields. In this case, our students assume the future professional identity. These identities evolve, shaping the experiences and perspectives of 21st-century students in diverse and dynamic ways.

The multiple identities of the 21st-century students chart the teachers' important task of building an inclusive, just, and equitable education. They challenge teachers to adopt meaningful and practical ways of ensuring all students who differ in their backgrounds, identities, sexual orientations, and interests are nurtured and have equal opportunities to participate and succeed in their education.

Why is it important to understand the multiple identities of 21st-century students?

Understanding the multiple identities of students encourages the teacher to seek up-to-date and structured knowledge as well as the ability to transmit this knowledge to produce substantial and transferable learning for different students. It is also important as it enables the teacher to nurture the students, taking into consideration their diverse identities and needs. Nurturing students requires a holistic approach that considers their academic, social, and emotional needs. Teachers who invest in building positive relationships, personalizing learning, and setting high expectations can create a supportive and engaging learning environment that fosters student growth and success (Doyle, 2023).

Implications of student identities on educational practice

Considering student identities in education steers teachers towards adopting student-centered approaches, which are pedagogical methods that place students at the forefront of the learning experience. These approaches empower learners by considering their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and individual needs. Key elements of student-centered education include active learning, collaborative projects, personalized learning pathways, and a focus on metacognition (Doyle, 2023). Some of the core principles and benefits of a student-centered approach are that it personalizes learning, tailoring the learning experience to individual student needs, interests, and abilities. This might involve using adaptive learning technologies or differentiated instruction.

Student-centered approaches captivate learners by allowing them to take ownership of their education. When students feel their voices are heard and their interests are considered, they are more likely to actively engage in the learning process. This heightened engagement promotes deeper understanding and retention of material learned (Doyle, 2023).

Conclusion

The need for educators, institutions, and policymakers to engage in ongoing professional development and self-reflection to challenge biases and address systemic barriers that hinder student success cannot be overemphasized if we are to make our institutions inclusive, free of discrimination against students based on their identities. This also calls for the need for educators to be trained to recognize and address the diverse needs of their students. This includes understanding how different identity markers intersect and impact students' learning experiences.

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