Identity Development Case Studies

All of these cases are based on true events. Please discuss one or more of the following case studies. What’s going on? How is the conflict based on identity development? What would you do to increase awareness, understanding, and esteem for your community? Participants from many schools throughout the country note that the issues resonate strongly with them, though the details of their case studies may differ. What are YOUR School’s “Case Studies”?

1. Your school starts up Affinity Groups. No one steps forward to head up the White Affinity Group or the Native American Affinity Group, so you don’t have one for these groups. You do have a group each for African Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Latinos and Latinas, LGBTQ people, and Jews. Your school also has a Multicultural Club open to anyone and everyone who wants to learn about self and others. The groups that exist report high satisfaction, engagement, sense of support, etc. A few months into the school year, a few vocal white students and Christian students (of various ethnicities) approach the school, saying that Affinity Groups exclude them and are unfair. Some of these students are fueled by their parents’ words and passion. Some of the parents say they understand why the school has Affinity Groups for marginalized populations, but they do not know how to help their children understand. These parents are taking a “you handle it” approach.

2. Monique is an African American student who is very proud of her Black heritage. She mode and code switches to meet academic and social expectations of the classroom, and she is a successful student. In unstructured spaces (lunch, hallways, etc.), Monique expresses herself and her understanding of her ethnic heritage by speaking Ebonics or African American Vernacular English with her Black friends; she does many of her school reports on African American leaders and role models; and she wears her hair proudly in an Afro daily. One day, she approaches the Diversity Director, frustrated by interactions with Ms. Johnson, an African American teacher. This teacher has repeatedly admonished the student over the use of Ebonics, saying “It’s not a real language, so you shouldn’t use it at school.” She feels that Ms. Johnson is being unfair and that she is going to influence other teachers to “keep her down.”
3. After years of hearing complaints from students of color, their families, and their allies that the curriculum only represents white (and mostly white male) authors, your English department has revamped the literature curriculum such that all students would read works by authors from various racial and ethnic groups. A few parents begin expressing concern that their white children are talking at home about how “class is always about people of color” and “we never read white authors.” Some parents and even teachers are also concerned that the students “will not be adequately exposed to the classics” and therefore “will not have the same academic advantage” as students from other schools which have a “more robust classic literature curriculum.” They are especially concerned about performance in standardized tests and college courses. These parents and teachers say that they support diversity and have nothing against the authors being presented, but they are pushing the school to have the changes to the literature curriculum to be implemented in optional or enrichment courses instead of the required courses.

4. Julio, a Latino student, has told the school counselor that he is negotiating a very confusing life. On one hand, he loves school. He is doing well in classes and has high academic ability and performance. On the other hand, he is enrolled in mostly honors classes, where he is one of the few (and often the only) Latino students. Enrique, his best friend from childhood years, started to diverge from Julio’s academic path starting freshman year when Julio was placed on an accelerated track and Enrique was not. Enrique struggles academically, and he has gotten into more disciplinary trouble the more his academic performance has slipped. These two friends have no classes together and are having difficulty maintaining their closeness. Julio’s friends in his honors classes have nicknamed him “Leo” recently, and Julio has tolerated it and sometimes even liked it. Enrique, hearing this, pushes Julio that he is no longer “connected to his roots” and “becoming whiter every day.” To prove himself to Enrique that he is “still one of the guys,” Julio agrees to graffiti the boys’ bathroom walls with their neighborhood gang’s symbol. They are caught in this act by a staff member.*
5. A 5th grade class is studying the Little Rock Eight story and the experiences of the first African American students in integrated schools. The curriculum is a well-vetted and successful one. It includes many readings, first person accounts, and an in-depth analysis of the n word (its history, impact, etc.). One day after school, Kevin, a 2nd grader at the same school, overhears his 5th grader brother reading aloud one of the readings with his classmate, a first person account that uses the n word in full form. Kevin mulls over the term and wonders what it means. At school, he looks up the n word in the dictionary. He gathers a few of his friends, and they talk about what the word means with some confusion, some amusement, and some discomfort. Two girls, one African American and one multiracial (part African heritage), see the boys engrossed in the dictionary. One of the boys looks at one of the girls, points to her, and giggles. The girls decide to go over and investigate, and they find out what the boys are up to. Angry and upset, they report the incident to a teacher.

* This scenario was adapted from Understanding Youth by Michael J Nakkula and Eric Toshalis.