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Book Review

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Davidson, A.L. (1996). Making and molding identity in schools: Student narratives on race, gender, and academic engagement. Albany: State University of New York Press.

The self is learned, yet ironically it often becomes a barrier to learning.
- Mary Catherine Bateson, 1994, p. 66

Making and Molding Identity in Schools presents detailed case studies of six high school students to illustrate how racial and ethnic identities struggle against the school policies, discourses, and practices that work to reproduce social categories. Ann Locke Davidson also shows how some teachers and programs successfully challenge social categories. She expands on current social theories that link identity exclusively to cultural, ecomonic, and political forces by portraying how identities develop in ordinary, everyday activities that occur over time in different school settings. Some of the identities that the students learn prevent some of them from successfully engaging in practices valued by the school.

This recursive relationship between identity and learning is one I continually struggle with. As both a classroom teacher and a doctoral student, I often feel pulled by the conflicting desires of these two identities. Sometimes I struggle to maintain my identity as the practicing teacher, so often marginalized in critical academic discussions in my educational course work. Both my identity as a woman and as an academic achiever are challenged regularly as I negotiate my status as a graduate student. The concept of a multiplicity of identities is one I experience on a daily basis. These experiences are mirrored in the writings of people like Sherry Turkle. "Now, in postmodern times, multiple identities are not longer so much at the margin of things. Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated" (Turkle, 1995, p.180)

When I read a book, such as Ann Locke Davidson's, what I demand as a teacher is information on how to better my students' chances for success. I want a framework with which to build an understanding of how some students succeed, others fail, and what role the teacher plays in their differing processes. I am also sensitive to the changes I undergo as I step outside of my classroom, my teacher role, and step into my graduate student role. What exactly it is that is changing from role to role is not clear, although, as Mary Catherine Bateson suggests, it is important to my learning.

I read Davidson's book hoping for a useful view of what identity is, how it changes, and how it participates in the learning process. Davidson begins by claiming that it is important to look at

identity in understanding both the failures and the successes of diverse students in America's public schools. After acknowledging the work of Ogbu and other anthropologists of education, Davidson points out that focusing on external forces such as "familial socialization, cultural practices or the perception of historical circumstances by group members" (Davidson, 1996, p. 3) leaves little or no room for individuals to resist or transform these relatively static, external forces. Instead of a group identity compatible with or in opposition to academic achievement, Davidson describes social categories created by the relations of power and knowledge which influence the identities that students reveal in schools.

Grounding her efforts in feminist, postmodern, and poststructural theory, Davidson argues for a fluid, dynamic model of social categories. She also draws on the concepts of disciplinary technology and serious speech acts "as practices that teach, or 'discipline' participants to the meaning of institutional (and social) categories" (Davidson, 1996, p. 4) and contributions to the understanding of acceptable participation. With a nod to Foucault, Davidson describes power as "practices and discourses that define normality in advance" (Davidson, 1996, p. 5) leaving room for resistance and transformation. Following in the tradition of George Mead's theory of social identity (Mead, 1934) Davidson describes identity " as a process that develops in a matrix of structuring social and institutional relationships and practices," (Davidson, 1996, p. 5).

With these understandings, Davidson prepares to demonstrate that

Presentations of self, ranging from resistance to assimilation, are linked not only to minority status and perceptions of labor market opportunities but also to disciplinary technologies, serious speech acts, and other factors at the institutional level. Because schools participate in negotiating the meanings students attach to identity, the ways in which teachers and schools handle power and convey ethically and racially relevant meanings become relevant to the conceptualization of students' behaviors (p. 5).

My academic identity followed the discussion of theoretical and historical contexts presented in Part I of this book with enthusiasm. My teacher identity, however, began to wonder if there would be any connection to my experiences with student behavior in my classroom. Part II begins the case studies of the six high school students that Davidson studied.

Davidson describes the ethnographic methods she used in her two-year study as intensive interviews, observations in and out of classrooms, collection of student school records, analyses of the school, and, at a later stage of the study, participant observation. She explicitly draws on her own experiences as a marginalized student and connects them to her understanding of the students she writes about. Davidson skillfully weaves thick descriptions into her interpretation of these students and their historical, structural, and cultural contexts within their schools. As I read the chapters, each describing a different student, I felt there was enough information to get to know them.

I met Carla and Marbella, who resisted the school's disciplinary technologies by achieving in accelerated classes. At the same time, they were isolated and silenced by the structure of a tracking system which allowed few minority students into the accelerated classes. I was encouraged by the story of Johnnie and how his remedial English teacher, Wendy Ashton,

encouraged him "to construct a cool school self" (p. 179) that allowed him to achieve academically and to express "a pro-African American identity at his high school" (p. 174).

For me, the most powerful case study was the study of Ryan, a white middle class male student. Davidson portrays his "all-American persona and the ideology of conformity that underlies it . . . [and] . . . explores how a youth, eager to grow, has learned that it is important to look compliant" (p. 136) at school. Since I teach in a primarily middle class school, this case study opened my eyes to see how much a student conforms who "pays attention to discerning what it is that his teachers want of him, sacrifices continued growth in areas of personal interest, and adjusts his academic work products to meet teachers' expectations" (p. 154). I could see the costs for individual students who not only resist, but also for those who conform to rigid and uniform expectations of school behavior. "What we have here is a situation in which there can be different selves, and it is dependent upon the set of social reactions that is involved as to which self we are going to be. If we can forget everything involved in one set of activities, obviously we relinquish that part of the self" (Mead, 1934, p. 143).

This book gave me much to think about as I interact with my students in our school. Davidson does explain how some teachers and some school structures, such as the Personal Effort for Progress program, can assist students in their attempts to enact academic identities that do not require them to relinquish their identities from outside of school.

Davidson introduced me to the students who revealed not only their fluid and adaptive identities, but also revealed how schools constrain their construction. I still cannot define identity, but perhaps it's not very useful to do so. If, as Davidson and the others I've mentioned suggest, identity is a process, then defining it necessarily limits possibilities for understanding. Instead of definitions, I believe descriptions offer more understanding of the ever-changing, yet mostly consistent *being* I name as my Self. The narratives presented by Davidson gave me enough rich information to think about and use in interactions with my own students. Davidson's narratives flesh out my skeletal ideas about identity which I have formed from writers like Mary Catherine Bateson.

"The self fluctuates through a lifetime and even through the day, altered from without by changing relationships and from within by spiritual end even biochemical changes, such as those of adolescence and menopause and old age. Yet the self is the basic thread with which we bind time into a single narrative. We improvise and struggle to respond in unpredictable and unfamiliar contexts, learning new skills and transmuting discomfort and bewilderment into valuable information about differenceeven, at the same time, becoming someone different" (Bateson, 1994, p. 66)

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