Beyond Categories

The Complex Identities of Adolescents

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What does it mean to be an adolescent in the United States today? In this chapter we attempt to provide insights into this question, based on our varied experiences with young people of different backgrounds. We are both teachers and researchers with a special interest in how race and ethnicity, social class, language, gender, sexual orientation, and other differences manifest themselves in students’ identities, and in how these identities are influenced by schooling. Both of us have taught for many years at levels ranging from elementary school through university. Our research—Sonia’s previous work with students of diverse cultural backgrounds and John’s ongoing research in “communities of adoption”—has rendered questions of identity enormously significant for both of us.¹ Our own backgrounds and developing identities are, of course, major reasons for this interest. Both John (biracial African American, adoptee and adoptive father, gay male teacher, and grandfather) and Sonia (Puerto Rican, Spanish-speaking female, teacher and teacher educator, mother, and grandmother) recognize how our own identities have shifted over the years. Hence, we share a keen curiosity about young people and the identities they create and re-create, and how their identities change based on their experiences and the contexts in which they live and study at any given time.

Human beings are constantly evolving and redefining themselves over the course of a lifetime. Adolescence is a particularly significant phase of life, during which young people try to figure out who they are. The great task of
adolescence is learning to express one's multiple identities in personally meaningful and socially acceptable ways. As educators, we need to understand the implications of adolescent identity formation for schooling. How are race and gender, for instance, affirmed or dismissed in school settings? What does it mean to be a lesbian in a school setting hostile to that identity? How can an adoptee explore his identity in a school environment where biological family ties are accorded higher status than ties of adoption? And how are students' quests for meaningful identities linked to learning? The changes one undergoes in one's identifications are due not just to individual preferences and experiences; that is, they are not simply psychological transformations that take place in one's own head. Identities also change in response to the sociopolitical contexts in which people live. Our identities have been shaped and continue to be influenced by the people with whom we interact and the material and social conditions of our lives. In this chapter, we focus on two young people who allowed us into their worlds through a series of interviews. These students come from different cities and towns, and they hail from various kinds of families and different social classes. They identify in multiple ways, based on such factors as family structure, race, sexual orientation, and national origin. In spite of these differences, they share a need to belong and to feel free to explore who they are. Finally, to explore how a sense of self can reach a comfortable—although always changing—status as one leaves adolescence, we conclude with the thoughts of a young man in the early years of adulthood.

CREATING IDENTITIES: CASES OF TWO YOUNG PEOPLE IN TRANSITION

Whether we are seasoned adults or young children, our identities are always in flux. The human impulse to categorize, however, has resulted in labeling people in ways that restrict the expression of complex identities. This tendency has been especially evident in the past several decades, given the resurgence in race and ethnicity in education. However, although significant in and of themselves, race, ethnicity, gender, and other traditional markers of identity do not tell the whole story.

Culture is a great deal messier than these static terms might imply. Researcher Steven Arvizu's description of culture as a verb rather than a noun begins to capture the dynamic nature of identity, particularly as defined by youth in an increasingly globalized world. For instance, in their research focusing on adolescents, Shirley Brice Heath and Milbrey McLaughlin found that ethnic labels provided only partial descriptions of the young people they studied. Their research suggests that, rather than serving as a primary identifier, ethnicity gives adolescents an "additional layer of identity" they can adopt as a matter of pride. In her later work, Heath found that young people, particularly those who live in urban areas, are involved in the creation of new cultural categories based on shared experiences, not just shared identities. According to Heath, these young people "think of themselves as a who and not a what" (emphasis in original). 4

Daniel Yon is another researcher who has found that conventional, static conceptions of culture are unsatisfactory for describing the multiple and hybrid realities of identities today. Yon conducted a study of high school students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds in Toronto, Ontario. In this research, he coined the term elusive culture to suggest the new and creative ways students made sometimes surprising and unpredictable identifications; for instance, a Serbian student identified as "Spanish" and a White male identified most closely with his Guatemalan classmates. Yon concluded:

Youth demonstrate tremendous flexibility in their capacity to make identifications, to experiment, take risks, discard and create ideas, and in these processes they resist an understanding of culture as something to simply embody, apply, or force others to have. 5

Raquel Romberg describes a similar phenomenon among Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland. Cultural chameleons is Romberg's term for those who "manage their lives through the combination, merging, or shifting of different cultural strategies." 6 In this way, Puerto Ricans and other young people with hybrid identities provide a fair healthier model of cultural adaptation than is commonplace.

Given the pressures to assimilate to both peer culture and, in some cases, a new national culture and society, it should come as no surprise that students develop unpredictable identifications. In her ethnographic study of immigrant youth at Madison High (her pseudonym for a racially and ethnically diverse school in California), Laurie Olsen found that adapting to a new culture often meant that young people needed "to abandon the fullness of their human identities as part of the process of becoming and being American." 7 In addition, Olsen found that many newcomers were surprised that coming to the United States did not automatically make them American. For some students, especially those whose backgrounds and physical characteristics differed most from the European American mainstream culture, factors such as skin color, religion, and language prevented a facile as-
Nick Greenberg: The Identities of a Transracial Adoptee

Nick Greenberg is a 14-year-old middle school student. He is tall and tan, with wavy black hair and a ready smile. In physical appearance, Nick might be taken for any number of ethnicities, races, or nationalities. That is, he epitomizes a racially ambiguous individual. Nick was adopted when he was a few months old, but he maintains contact with his birth mother and his older brother, who lives with her. During this interview, Nick spoke honestly about his feelings regarding his multiracial heritage and other people’s expectations for how he “should” act:

I look more like my birth mother than my birth father because he was African American and my birth mother is White. . . . My adoptive father is Jewish, and my adoptive mother is Christian. Usually, I check off “African American” and “Native American” because I know I’m at least part Native American. Sometimes when I say I’m Jewish, this one kid says, “No, you’re not Jewish. You have to act more Jewish.” To me, I have no idea what it means to “act more Jewish.” Maybe it means to wear a yarmulke or go to synagogue.

I’ve been told that I talk White, but that was in a joking way. Certain Black kids will say I shouldn’t listen to a certain kind of music since I’m Black. It kind of gets annoying to be told what music I’m supposed to listen to. They continue to press on and say I’m supposed to “act Black.” When I ask them how that’s supposed to be, they can’t really answer that because there’s no way you’re supposed to act if you’re Black, Chinese, White—you’re just supposed to act the way you feel.

Nick identifies tastes in music and clothes, along with language styles, as important markers of identity that are frequently used to define him. Being raised by his White adoptive parents in a predominantly White environment, it is understandable why Nick “sounds White” to some. Yet partly because he listens to some rap artists, and partly because he regularly visits his birth family in a predominantly African American neighborhood of another city, Nick is able to “code-switch” and adopt an urban (some might say “Black”) manner of speech. Nevertheless, it has not always been easy for him to do so.

Talking about his interactions with African American students in his middle school, Nick related a few incidents that occurred in the halls, during which he was forced to navigate tricky racial boundaries as a multiracial, racially ambiguous student. The names others hurl his way hint at their confusion about how to place Nick in the social circles at school:

Most of the Black people act kind of racist towards me because I don’t act like them. They usually say “nigger,” which I find pretty offensive. Like, “Out of my way, you nigger”—stuff like that. “Nigger” is probably the worst thing I’ve ever been called. Some people have called me “gay,” “Gay” and “nigger” are the things they call me the most. One Black person was picking on me because I didn’t “act Black.” And two other Black people, they kept on telling him to stop, and they said, “He doesn’t have to act Black; he can act however he wants to. He can act Chinese for all I care.” The first guy wasn’t too happy, but he left. I thought it was pretty good.

I think it’s starting to sink in that people don’t have to act like their race. They can act any way they want. Kids don’t really have to tell anybody how they’re supposed to act according to their race, or gender for that matter.

While on the surface Nick resists attempts by other students to get him to “act like his race,” he nevertheless usually includes himself when he talks about Black people; that is, he identifies as African American. At other times, Nick speaks about African Americans as others. This “now I’m one thing, now I’m something else, but I’m all of me simultaneously” approach reflects a hybridized, “both/and” approach to racial identification, especially characteristic of how identifications are made by individuals who are multiracial. Such an approach is a refreshing change from the outdated “either/or” model from an earlier era, which forced people to identify with only one or the other parent’s racial designation.
When asked explicitly to describe where he feels he fits, Nick answered:

I don’t really choose friends by color; I choose them by who they are on the inside. I watch what they do. If they do a lot of laughing and smiling and are not acting like jerks, then I consider them nice people, and I’ll see if I can make friends with them. I have a variety of friends from different races, not just a single race. I have White people, Black people, Asian people, German, Russian, Canadian, et cetera, as friends.

I don’t feel I fit in with totally Black people. I feel like if it’s more mixed, I have a better chance of fitting in. I would actually have to say I fit in best in the water. I know it sounds kind of weird, but that’s something that I’m really good at. I can just swim around and forget about everything that’s happened to me.

Nick’s comment about “forgetting about everything” when he’s swimming serves as a poignant reminder of the strife he experiences as a result of rigid racial categories. For him, how people act is more important than how they identify. Nick explains that he “has a better chance of fitting in” in mixed settings. Although schools sometimes respond to diversity by offering cultural clubs (such as Black student unions or Hispanic student associations), which are modeled after groups popularized on college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, culture-specific clubs may not meet the identity needs of students like Nick. One hopeful sign is that there are more and more organizations for mixed-race students on college campuses around the country. Perhaps soon they will become established at secondary schools as well. Nick’s situation further suggests that schools can do more to promote inter-racial activities for those who actively seek involvement in pluralistic, rather than ethnocentric, extracurricular experiences.

Elsewhere in the interview, Nick talked about visiting his birth mother and brother in the large northeastern city where they reside. Because he maintains contact with his birth family, Nick's adoption is considered an open adoption. Growing up in an open adoption has provided Nick with access to people who can answer many of the identity questions with which adoptees often grapple: Why was I adopted? Where did I come from? What does my biological family look like? Nick talked about how he handles being adopted and other people's curiosity about his unique family:

When people find out I’m adopted, they usually say, “You’re adopted?” They are kind of shocked, because they thought that I was just—that they were my “real” parents and I just had a little bit darker skin.

I go to this group where everybody there is adopted. It meets maybe once or twice a month, maybe a little more. We do social activities, but we always talk about adoption and what our lives are like and how we feel about it. It kind of feels useful to be able to get it out and tell other adoptees what it’s like, like children your age. We like the stuff we do, but we also like being able to talk to each other really well.

Nick’s reference to people who wonder about his “real” parents indicates a common mistake made by well-intentioned individuals when discussing adoption. Some adoptees insist that the parents who raised them are their real parents, while others reject the term altogether. It is more appropriate to be specific and to talk about “birth” (or “biological”) and “adoptive” parents, since all of them, whether they are known or not by the adoptee, are real people with real identities. Moreover, all have a real influence in the life of the adopted adolescent.

As an adoptee, Nick is fortunate to be able to integrate two powerful influences that shape his identity: namely, his birth family and his adoptive family. While open adoptions are becoming more commonplace, most adoptees are faced with knowing little, if anything, about their biological family origins. Discriminatory laws remain on the books and continue to deny teenagers knowledge about their birth parents, medical histories, possible siblings, and so on, until they reach the age of eighteen. At this age of majority, state laws usually allow adoptees to request access to their records, but even then information may be withheld, if it is available at all.

Nick’s case is remarkably different. Because Nick’s is a transracial adoption, when people see him with his adoptive parents it quickly becomes obvious that he is adopted. Furthermore, since he knows his birth mother and brother, should he ever decide he wants to meet his birth father, he can always ask them for his name and whereabouts. The open nature of Nick’s adoption circumvents the problem of access to identity information; it is not restricted by outdated laws that privilege the rights of parents over those of adopted young people.

Whether adoptions are done in the innovative open manner or follow the traditional closed approach, the presence of adoptees in school raises questions for teachers who may inadvertently send biased messages to students and families. Schools help to maintain the higher status of families connected biologically by reproducing mainstream definitions of family. For instance, a school form that asks simply for “mother’s name” and “father’s name” disdons the reality of the multiple parents in a complex family con-
figuration like Nick’s. Similarly, students and parents should be able to check or write in more than one category if authorities insist on asking students to identify themselves by racial group.

In addition, assignments to chart family trees in social studies or biology classes typically privilege biological ancestors and descendants, making it difficult for adoptees to participate fully. For adoptees who do have relevant information, fitting it all into the traditional linear family tree model poses a challenge. Quite simply, their huge family tree diagrams would look more like forests. For adoptees who don’t have access to their birth families’ histories, having to fill in the tree chart as if they were not adopted can feel dishonest at best and like a betrayal of family ties at worst. Moreover, adopted young people are often keenly aware of the contingent nature of their identities, as reflected in various family ties, family names, legal documents such as birth certificates (which in their case have already been falsified or “amended”), and other identity markers most people take for granted. Simply to appear more inclusive, if not to become more affirming of the array of student identities, schools can change to accommodate the reality of complex families that have been formed through adoption or otherwise.

REBECCA FLORENTINA: COMING OUT SAFELY

IN HIGH SCHOOL

Rebecca Florentina is seventeen years old and attends public school in the small New England city of West Blueridge, which has a visible and active lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Recently, as a senior in high school, Rebecca “came out”; that is, she began acknowledging her homosexuality openly. Rebecca wears her hair boyishly short and dyed green, and a string of multicolored pride rings hangs around her neck. During the interview she wore a T-shirt that read, “I’m not a dyke, but my girlfriend is.” Rebecca belongs to the school’s gay-straight alliance (GSA), one of a growing number of school-sanctioned clubs that provide a sense of safety and support to LGBT students and their allies. She describes the level of tolerance of homosexuality in her community and school:

When I came out, my friends were awesome. I didn’t lose a single one. So it was pretty cool. I think, in West Blueridge, if you don’t approve of the lifestyle, you don’t say it, because you’re going to be offending a heck of a lot of people. There are so many lesbians around. I think if people do mind, they keep their mouths shut. I just think that because we’re in West

Blueridge we get treated so much better than people in other schools. I mean, people have gotten killed. You know the school is accepting because the school has a gay-straight alliance. I’m in the school’s GSA. We’ve gone around and asked teachers to put Safe Zone stickers on their door. The majority of them actually have them on their doors. Most of the teachers don’t mind. There’s a couple that are kind of iffy.

There are probably three of us who are “out” at school. I walk around wearing this shirt: “I’m not a dyke, but my girlfriend is.” I’m lesbian, butch lesbian, whatever you want to call it. I just want people to know that I’m not a little femmie. That’s basically how I define myself.

Rebecca identifies herself not simply as a lesbian student. It is important to her that people recognize her as a particular kind of lesbian, an out, butch lesbian (or, in her words, “not a little femmie”).

As an openly gay student, Rebecca has taken advantage of the GSA offered at her school. There she has found allies who share her interest in increasing the visibility of LGBT issues and in promoting a more tolerant atmosphere. But other comments Rebecca makes suggest that not all spaces in the school make her feel equally safe to express aspects of her identity:

I’m in music, and everybody there knows about me and my girlfriend, because we’re both in music. They’re all cool with it. And if they’re not, they don’t say anything. But I’ll be reluctant—like I wear my sweatshirt [over the T-shirt] all the time, but I’ll be reluctant to wear this in the halls, or in the bathroom or something. I don’t wear this T-shirt when I’m alone in school. I don’t think teachers could do anything. You’re not going to stop the kids from doing something they want to do. If I’m in the hall and some other kid is in the hall, and there’s no teachers around, he can hit me if he wants. Or she.

Clothing arises as an important marker of identity in Rebecca’s story. She talks about her desire to increase lesbian visibility within the school by wearing her “dyke” T-shirt. At the same time, she worries about other people’s reactions and threats to her physical safety. In some schools, dress codes prohibit students from wearing T-shirts that might be considered offensive, or that contain a message that might distract students from learning. Rebecca’s T-shirt, no doubt, would present a challenge for teachers and administrators in charge of enforcing dress codes in such schools. It is worth bearing in mind the important role that freedom of expression plays in adolescent identity, particularly for students like Rebecca. Being able to decide
where and when to display her T-shirt serves a significant function in Rebecca’s exploration of her newfound identity as an out lesbian.

Rebecca’s fears for her safety came up at numerous times in the interview, as well as her belief that teachers play an important role in the extent to which she feels free to express who she is:

This girl said, “Oh, you faggot” in one of my classes, but I don’t know if the teacher heard or not. Students just say “faggot” all the time. It makes me angry. I mean, there’s nothing you can do, really. It made me feel so much safer when I had a teacher say, in his class the first day, “There will be no swearing, there will be no slurs like ‘faggot’ or whatever in my class.” I have had only two teachers in four years of high school that have ever said something like that. I think if you had to hold your tongue in class without saying that stuff, it would help a little bit.

When you get out in the halls, it’s a totally different atmosphere. People act basically the opposite of how they act in class. The climate is like, if you’re generally like everybody else, you’re fine. But if you’re totally opposite of what everybody else looks like and acts like, you’ll get shoved into a locker or something, or told to shut up. All we can do is hope to educate teachers, because there’s kids in middle school getting beat up in the hallways because of homophobic, and the teachers don’t do anything about it.

Even when teachers make it a point to set standards for respectful interaction in their individual classrooms, there is often a discrepancy, as Rebecca points out, between students’ behavior in class and their actions in common areas, such as the school hallways, cafeteria, library, or restrooms. This discrepancy can reflect the need for some students to gain a sense of control over the ways their identities are being constructed by their schooling experience. For example, one common way adolescent identities get expressed is through resistance to adult norms. If teachers simply impose what may seem like superficial “political correctness” about the use of slurs and put-downs, then students may well reject these values when teachers are out of sight and out of earshot.

Similarly, Rebecca’s remarks about the messages students receive from school curricula are particularly insightful:

The health class in the high school looks at same-sex whatever, or queer whatever, in a derogatory way. The curriculum says, “Here’s these lesbian people, and we should accept them,” something like that. It’s not like, “Here’s the great things about being gay.” It’s like, “Here’s all the things that happen, and things that people think of them.” And I don’t even think it’s that accepting. It’s just like, “There are people who are gay.” And that’s the whole curriculum. And, “Here’s a dental dam,” and that’s it. And the whole class would laugh, and they’d move on. So I think if you want to educate people better, get the health teachers to put better curriculum for teaching about same-sex, transgender, anything. Because it’s looked at in a negative way instead of in a positive way.

Rebecca articulates the limits of supposedly inclusive health lessons, which do make mention of lesbians, but then don’t provide students with accurate, possibly controversial information about real lesbian lives and gay-related health issues. Merely mentioning a dental dam in the context of a lesson on safer sex, for instance, only gives students something to snicker about, rather than increasing their understanding of lifesaving health concerns. Clearly, teachers need assistance not only with gathering appropriate resources, but also with fashioning their own personal approaches to presenting issues that may make themselves or their students—not to mention parents or administrators—uncomfortable. By glossing over and oversimplifying LGBT issues in the way Rebecca describes, teachers reinforce simplistic labeling that can restrict the lives of LGBT students.

Rebecca sums up her assessment of how much teachers at her school support her lesbian identity as follows:

We have an English teacher who has a lesbian daughter. That’s the only reason he brings stuff up like that. Now he’s talking about gay issues, like every other day in class. He doesn’t talk about his daughter, but he’s letting the kids read books that are very liberal and very queer-friendly. I think the teachers who are like that are the teachers who have a lesbian daughter, or are gay themselves, or who have the kids in class saying, “I’m a lesbian. You’re offending me in class, like me and my other friends.” That’s the only reason they do it.

Lesbians are just like everybody else. I mean, everybody sees it as somebody who’s different and not normal. But it’s just your sexuality. I don’t identify myself as like, “Hi, I’m Rebecca and I’m a lesbian.” It’s like, “This is me, and this is my sexuality.” That’s as far as I’m going to go with it. I mean, I’ll wear a T-shirt or something—I’m proud of who I am. But by wearing this T-shirt, all I’m saying is that here’s a happy kid, I’m fine, whatever.

Teachers should value open-mindedness, I think, and being inclusive of everybody. It’s hard to be politically correct in everything, every second in every word you say. But I don’t know. There are some teachers you just don’t want to approach sometimes, because they are very closed.
We cannot overstate the significant role played by the teacher in establishing the climate in the classroom. Even when teachers attempt to share power and run their classes in a democratic fashion, students may still see the classroom as belonging to the adult authority figure. Rebecca placed as much responsibility on her teachers as she took herself. For example, she expresses appreciation for the teachers who make an effort to use inclusive language, who set class expectations for tolerance, and who bring gay content into their lessons. At the same time, she doesn’t wait for the world to change before she herself takes action. In the way she negotiates the expression of her unfolding lesbian identity, Rebecca is an inspiring example of the power of one individual to make a difference, simply by insisting on being true to herself.

IMPLICATIONS OF COMPLEX IDENTITIES FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

While identity construction might appear to be a profoundly personal matter, it is also a social and political matter, precisely because it is deeply implicated in the struggle to develop a sense of self within a social sphere. Thus, these are not just individual issues; rather, they have implications for educational practice, as well as for the social and cultural climate created in schools. These implications relate to teachers’ professional development as well as school policy and practices. For educators who choose to provide a safe space for the free exploration of adolescent identities in schools, a number of important lessons can be drawn from the students’ experiences presented in this chapter.

The themes of choice and flexibility are crucial for youth. Because their identities are in flux and more complicated than static labels can hope to convey, neither of the young people featured here would appreciate being labeled permanently with any one descriptor. For example, Rebecca is not simply a lesbian; she wants to be known as a butch lesbian, and not a “femme.” Furthermore, at the same time she makes visible her lesbian identity and advocates for its equality with other identities, she insists that she is more than her sexuality. She also identifies as Italian and as a musician, for example. Similarly, Nick is African American, European American, Native American, Jewish, and Christian simultaneously. He is also part of and loved by the members of both his birth family and his adoptive family, all of whom are real family to him. Schools need to catch up to the fast-changing identifications being created and re-created as today’s students make their way through complicated social contexts.

Opportunities for peer association are valuable to students, in class and out. In their own ways, Nick and Rebecca articulate the benefits they gain from speaking with other young people who share similar situations. For example, Nick discussed the importance of his adoptees’ group, and Rebecca mentioned the meaning she finds as an active member of the GSA. Although none existed at her school, Rebecca mentioned that she would join an Italian American cultural club, were one available; similarly, Nick might benefit from participating in a multicultural interest group, particularly one organized specifically for multiracial students.

While both students expressed the opinion that “teachers can’t really do anything” about harassment in school, it is nonetheless incumbent upon educators to create school environments that are free from bullying. Teachers can do more to share power with students in order to develop school climates that genuinely respect diversity. Specifically, teachers can work with students in ways that go further than forcing them to pay lip service to politically correct verbiage only when adults are around.

How do teachers invite students to co-create respectful school climates? Rebecca’s case suggests that modeling behavior that takes LGBT concerns seriously is one place to start. Elsewhere in her interview, Rebecca talked about a teacher who commented casually at the end of class that he had seen an article in the newspaper about a gay issue. Rebecca described feeling accepted and affirmed when he unexpectedly brought up a topic of concern to her as a lesbian. Having such conversations publicly, within earshot of other students, sends a clear message that LGBT topics are not taboo. Moreover, students learn that gay issues can be discussed seriously by gays and straights alike.

Teachers need more time to focus on issues of identity and diversity, both through their preservice education and through inservice professional development. Although schools and colleges of education are devoting more attention to concerns of diversity and identity, there is still much work to be done. Teachers who are planning curricula around themes of family heritage, genetics, or genealogy, for example, might benefit from professional time set aside to think through the implications of their lesson plans for marginalized groups, such as adopted, bicultural, or LGBT youth. Using curricula to reflect the realities of nontraditional families, such as those headed by two lesbian moms, for example, as well as families formed
through adoption, invites all students to feel freer to express their unique identities in a climate of openness, safety, and mutual respect. Finally, providing teachers with time to reflect on and reconsider their own ideas about race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and changing definitions of family can help schools become more affirming of the complex identities of today’s students.

**JOAQUÍN ROSARIO: BEGINNING ADULTHOOD WITH A STRONG SENSE OF SELF**

We conclude our exploration of adolescent identity with the words of a man in the next stage of his life, young adulthood. Joaquin Rosario is twenty-two years old, and he currently attends one of the most prestigious liberal arts colleges in the nation. He grew up in poverty in a large urban area where he attended public schools, excelling so much that he received a full scholarship to the college. Joaquin confessed that in high school he had the “freedom” to excel academically because, besides being a strong student, he was an accomplished athlete. This identity gave him tremendous credibility in the eyes of his peers. But claiming his identity as both an urban Puerto Rican and a good student was not always easy. How could he be both in a context that only valued one or the other?

Joaquin noticed at the college’s orientation that he was one of only two Latinos in the entering class. In spite of this context, it took going to a college steeped in privilege for Joaquin to be given the opportunity to study his heritage. It was after this experience that he began the process of claiming both identities of Puerto Rican and scholar, and along the way he picked up even more ways to define himself. Thus, Joaquin has emerged with a strong sense of self, comfortable with the complexity of his identity. And although he is “only” Puerto Rican, Joaquin recognizes that even what may seem to be a fairly straightforward identity is more complicated than it may appear. He says he can neither “limit his identity” nor define it solely in terms of his ancestral homeland. While he feels connected to the island of Puerto Rico through family stories and through cultural traits such as language, music, food, and clothing, to name a few, Joaquín remarks that his identity is always much more complex than “just one thing.” Here are his thoughts about who he is and how he arrived at this point:

Physically, I can only trace my roots as far back as my great-grandparents. One of my great-grandmothers is still alive. She’s ninety-eight years old and can still remember how she had to fetch water from the well, and how

her house was made of wooden planks and sheets of aluminum with a dirt floor. Historically, however, I am aware that as a Puerto Rican I come from a long history of merging and mixing of bloods and cultures. The indigenous inhabitants of the island now called Puerto Rico; the European traders, conquistadors, and slave owners; the African slaves (who were a diverse group to begin with) that were brought to the island both to work and be traded, are all ingredients of who I am.

But I cannot limit my identity to the history of the island where all four of my grandparents were born. Being born and raised in the urban center of a Northeast city, many more things have been factors in molding my life and my identity. I am an urban, bilingual, heterosexual, Roman Catholic, Puerto Rican male that enjoys listening to salsa as much as hip-hop, who can savor the taste of tostones as much as a side of collard greens. I can wear baggy jeans, a “hoodie,” and “Timbs,” put on a three-piece suit with high polished shoes, or a guayabera and Dockers, and fit in anywhere I go.

My multiple cultures allow me to move seamlessly across borders. I can speak proper English with an almost undetectable accent, I can talk as much trash about “yo momma” as anyone else in my neighborhood, or I can drop some knowledge while spitting/speaking my Spanish/Spanghlish slang. My identity cannot be classified or contained into one or two categories. I am always much more than just one thing.

It is clear that border-crossing for Joaquin is not simply a metaphor, but an expression of his lived reality. Joaquín can and does move literally across boundaries marking different neighborhoods and even nations, as well as different social contexts and linguistic communities. This mobility leads to the hybridity, adaptability, and freedom of choice he enjoys.

**LEARNING FROM YOUNG PEOPLE WITH COMPLEX IDENTITIES**

Unfortunately, not all young people have the privileges that Joaquín enjoys. As elementary and high schools move to affirm students in their identity explorations, students will have fewer reasons to struggle through adolescence in silence and confusion before claiming their selfhood. It is imperative that all educators understand how race, gender, and other differences matter in school. Many teachers, particularly those at the secondary level, would rather focus on the content they teach than on the emotional and social concerns of their students. But it is becoming more obvious that these cannot be separated.

In her research at Madison High, Laurie Olsen found that the great majority of teachers did not believe that they needed additional preparation to
serve the new diversity at the school. Most reported that being “color blind” was enough. Yet Olsen’s research revealed tremendous discordance and rage among the students in the school, as well as a silence concerning racism and other forms of exclusion. This underscores the need for teachers to come to grips with what impact identity has on students’ learning and their sense of belonging at school.

For students who do not fit into tidy identity boxes, raising teachers’ awareness of changing identifications among adolescents can enhance this sense of belonging. In our interviews with students who negotiate complex identities on a daily basis, they expressed a need for teachers to take notice of intolerance based on identities rendered invisible by the school. Both Nick and Rebecca spoke poignantly of the impact of harassment in the hallways, and even in classrooms, about which teachers apparently knew and did nothing.

The task of supporting the complex identities of students like Nick and Rebecca is as complex as these students are themselves. Yet as researcher Frederick Erickson has written, “When we think of culture and social identity in more fluid terms ... we can find a foundation for educational practice that is transformative.” How can teachers and other educators engage in the kind of transformative practices that Erickson suggests? One way might be to envision multicultural school communities as “cultures of commitment” (to borrow a term from anthropologist Gerd Baumann). These are associations of diverse individuals that cut across national, religious, ethnic, and other identifications but are united by a common purpose, a shared project and vision.

If educators, for example, united their school communities around a vision of high expectations and democratic participation for all students, schools might more effectively foster inclusive, respectful, accepting, and empowering school climates. In such environments, perhaps more students would find the freedom to explore their unfolding identities and form new identifications based not on outmoded, confining labels, but on their real needs.

NOTES
8. Olsen, Made in America.