

Identity Education: What It Is & Why We Need It

By Alana Caires

What is the purpose of school? On the most basic level, it is meant to educate the younger generations so they have the skills and knowledge they need to function, and ideally, be successful in our society. Traditionally, our education system focuses on mathematics, English, history, and science as the core disciplines, with various other academic branches added along the way. One subject that is often neglected within schools is personal identity. While the previously mentioned subjects are still extremely vital, the ability to understand identity is just as important (if not more). Identity is something that is always present; one may be able go through their day without math, but the same cannot be said about identity. The many qualities of a person including their background, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and socioeconomic status impact their decision making and view of the world. Because of the significant role identity has on one's place in the world and relationship to others, time should be taken in school for students to explore it.

In my own experience, the only time in schools dedicated to understanding one's own experience was minimal and appeared to be an afterthought. In addition, while we did partially address some social and political issues pertaining to identity, there was never a formal unit on the topic. Having an identity education class would create the space for matters of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism/homophobia, and other types of discrimination to be discussed with enough time and resources. Students would have the opportunity to see the intersection of the different core subjects, begin a personal journey of discovering themselves, and learn more about their classmates. This will build confidence because students can feel comfortable knowing that who they are is "normal" and accepted. This also applies to mental health—a somewhat taboo topic despite its importance. If there was time dedicated to recognizing and understanding mental health, perhaps more people would get access to resources that could help them live a better life. In addition, kindness and respect are values that people should have and having this type of class would help implement them at a young age. Ignorance is the fuel of hate, so therefore education is the extinguisher. By taking the time to clearly state and appreciate the differences and similarities people have in this world, one's capacity for empathy will grow. Identity education will help students to become caring, conscious, and critical members of society.

Social and political issues permeate our country, yet students—a group that is highly impacted by these issues—are often left out of the dialogue. They are considered too young or too naïve. If we give students the chance, however, to explore why the issues arise and what they can do about them, they could (and should) be included in the conversation. Ignorance does not have to correlate with age; students can understand the many facets of identity, but only if we

give them the opportunity to do so. By incorporating this type of education into our schools, students can become prepared activists supported by knowledge and experience.

Whether someone is a student in first grade or a CEO of a major company, identity impacts their day-to-day experiences. Instead of neglecting to address identity or barely acknowledging its existence, we should face it head on. By doing so, we can help our students to become confident, empathetic, well-informed members of society who take a stand for what they believe in. In the end, isn't that the ideal outcome of education anyway?