

## Have You Been *Wondering?*

# What Is Positive Social Identity Development?

## Overview and Context

Positive social identity development is the process of naming and accepting key aspects of who you are as an individual. This process unfolds over the course of an individual's life as they grow into their sense of self and is impacted by the messages they receive from others about different aspects of their identity. The process includes developing language, as well as historical and cultural knowledge, that affirms and accurately describes their membership in multiple identity groups. When students develop a positive social identity, they recognize how peoples' multiple identities interact to create unique and complex individuals. Students who demonstrate a positive social identity can express pride, confidence, and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people, and they can effectively negotiate differences between cultures.

Research indicates that within a learning environment, it is crucial to normalize differences so that students learn how to identify, embrace, and accept them, instead of ignoring them, which contributes to positive social identity development. Schools also have the important task of supporting students on their individual development journey because it plays a key role in their ability to learn. When students learn to celebrate themselves and others, combat negative or unkind messages, and utilize tools and strategies to advocate for themselves and others, they are more likely to be successful within the school environment and beyond the classroom.

## Why Is It Important To Have A Sense of Belonging?

Positive identity development is tied to feelings of belonging. Belonging is the fulfillment of the human need to be taken in, cared for, protected, and valued by a group, community, or organization. Research shows that there are several benefits of positive social identity: it helps foster prosocial actions like caring for or receiving social support, helps satisfy the psychological need for esteem from others, and provides people a sense of belonging within a social group. There is also a correlation between positive social identity and school performance. DeLeon Gray, associate professor of educational psychology and equity in the North Carolina State College of Education, shares how cultivating a sense of belonging in schools can have positive impacts on students. Gray says, "A sense of belonging at school means feeling a sense of acceptance, respect, inclusion and support in a learning environment". Gray goes on to say that students who feel a sense of belonging are more energized, on-task, and are likely to choose to be in a school environment. Students who do not feel a sense of belonging often experience the opposite: they have a harder time staying on-task, have issues with emotional health, and avoid the environment where they feel like they don't belong.

## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**BELONGING:** Fulfillment of the human need to be taken in, cared for, protected, and valued by a group, community, or organization. Belonging is created through actions that express affinity, empathy, and generosity and also allows for redress of grievances and more.

**SOCIAL IDENTITY:** A person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s). Examples of this include age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, religion, etc.

**PERSONAL IDENTITY:** A person's self image, and what makes them unique from others. Examples of this include, hobbies, interests, personality traits, roles you have or had (i.e. oldest sibling).

**COGNITIVE LOAD:** The amount of information our working memory can process at any given time. In terms of education, cognitive load theory can help to avoid overloading students with more than they can process.

Sources adapted from:

- [Social Identity Theory: Definition, History, Examples, & Facts](#)
- [What is Cognitive Load Theory?](#)



Source adapted from:

- [The Importance of a Child's Social Identity](#)
- [Forbes - Missing Your People: Why Belonging Is So Important And How To Create It](#)
- [Why is it Important for Students to Feel a Sense of Belonging at School?](#)

## Frameworks to Support Positive Identity Development

### Identity-Conscious Education

Dr. Liza A. Talusan is a facilitator, educator, and scholar-practitioner in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Dr. Talusan's book, *The Identity-Conscious Educator: Building Habits & Skills for a More Inclusive School*, focuses on identity-conscious work within school settings and provides many resources to support students' positive social identity development over time. Two key concepts she uses throughout the book are identity-blind and identity-conscious approaches to education.

**Identity-blind approach:** this approach emphasizes that differences do not impact who people are or how they interact. This approach often minimizes differences and focuses instead on similarities between groups. While this approach seems like it prioritizes what makes us the same, which can feel unifying, ultimately, it means that people ignore differences that impact how individuals see and experience the world. This approach may sound like: "My students are just my students - I don't see their race."

**Identity-conscious approach:** this approach emphasizes that differences matter. Dr. Talusan writes, "This approach is most commonly understood as multiculturalism, the practice of valuing differences in classes and communities, and it results in improved intergroup relationships" (17). This approach may sound like: "I meet my students where they are at and pay attention to what they need."

### Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors Framework

Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors is a framework that helps explain how children see themselves in literature and other classroom media, but it can also help people examine their own (and others') identities and experiences. The phrase, mirrors and windows, was first introduced by Emily Style, who is the founding co-director of [the SEED Project](#). Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, who has been referred to as the mother of multicultural children's literature, further developed the concept and coined the phrase, windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. In terms of literature, a window allows children to look through and view other worlds and see similarities and differences between themselves and the characters, a mirror allows children to see themselves reflected in the story, and a sliding glass door allows children to enter that world. Rowland Hall educators use this framework to support positive social identity development in the classroom, especially in the Beginning School and Lower School.

Sources adapted from:

- [What Are Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors?](#)



## READ WATCH LISTEN

### READ

- [NAIS - Identity, Affinity, Reality](#)
- [Learning For Justice: Making Space](#)

### WATCH

- [Talking About Race with Young Students with Dr. Beverly Tatum](#)
- [26 Mini-Films for Exploring Race, Bias and Identity with Students](#)

### LISTEN

- [Nice White Parents](#)
- [Big Think: Social Identity Development with Dr. Sandra Chapman](#)

Curious what reflecting on your identity looks like? [Check out this activity from Liza Talusan's book.](#)

## Supporting Children’s Social Identity Development

How can parents/caregivers support their child(ren)’s social identity development? Extending the work that educators at Rowland Hall engage in to support students’ ongoing social identity development at home is crucial to students’ sense of self. Parents/caregivers can talk to their child(ren) about their social identity development, which offers them a window into what their child(ren) are proud of and where there might be a struggle or a challenge for them. Parents/caregivers can also acknowledge and value their child(ren)’s differences as it makes them uniquely themselves, reinforcing that they are worthy of respect and belonging within our community. Additionally, parents/caregivers can buy or borrow books where their child(ren) have opportunities to see themselves and others represented; this ties into the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors framework (see above), which can offer further opportunities to discuss where their child(ren) feels belonging and where they still might be struggling with feelings of belonging.

Source adapted from:

- [The Importance of a Child's Social Identity](#)

## What Is Happening At Rowland Hall?

At Rowland Hall, we engage in the practice of helping all students develop a positive identity through curricular choices, community conversations, and holding gathering spaces for those who are often marginalized. Utilizing the frameworks mentioned above, our teachers and administrators work to get to know each child and their needs to best support them in their learning environment. Part of this process includes offering affinity groups in developmentally appropriate ways from the Lower School through Upper School as well as opportunities for all students to learn about each other’s backgrounds, differences, and needs.

### What are affinity groups?

Affinity spaces bring together people who share a common identifier—such as race, gender, religion, ethnicity, ability—or shared life experiences. Affinity groups are for individuals who identify as members of the group and who can speak from the I perspective. They are identity-based support groups that are vital to fostering historically marginalized students’ feelings of belonging within an environment and system where they are often the only or one of a few students with a similar identity.

### Why are affinity groups important?

Affinity groups provide an opportunity for students who are in the numerical minority to share their experiences, identify strategies for navigating the school environment, and to engage more deeply with and uplift one another. They support students’ feeling of belonging and success at school by reducing the pressure they feel as marginalized individuals. Affinity groups also give both students and adults in the school community a common language in which to discuss not only the program, but also larger issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

