

Exploring Educational Management Strategies and Identity Formation in Multicultural Classrooms from the Perspective of Identity Fluidity

Huaiyu Zhang

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, MS5 1V6, Canada

Abstract: Globalization has accelerated the cross-national and cross-cultural mobility of populations. Multicultural classrooms have become a common occurrence in schools. Student groups encompass not only individuals from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds, but also international students and children of migrant workers. Their identities are no longer fixed, single labels, but rather exhibit dynamic, negotiated, and fluid characteristics. This identity fluidity infuses the classroom with cultural diversity but also presents management challenges. Traditional classroom management models, centered on "unified norms," tend to overlook issues such as identity anxiety and cultural conflict arising from student identity differences, and can even hinder the formation of positive identities. This paper, drawing on the theory of identity fluidity and drawing on practical experience in multicultural education, employs literature research and theoretical analysis to systematically examine the manifestations and management dilemmas of identity fluidity in multicultural classrooms. Furthermore, it proposes three management principles: subjectivity, inclusiveness, and interactivity. Specific management strategies, including curriculum integration, interactive teaching, and shared rule-making, are constructed. Furthermore, the paper explores practical approaches for students to develop positive identities through cultural expression, cross-cultural dialogue, and social practice. This research aims to provide practical solutions for the educational management of multicultural classrooms, enrich the application of identity theory in educational settings, and help students develop robust identities that combine cultural confidence and cross-cultural tolerance through dynamic identity negotiation.

Keywords: Identity Fluidity, Multicultural Classroom, Educational Management Strategy, Identity Formation, Inclusive Education.

1. Introduction

The "China Education Modernization 2035" initiative proposes "promoting educational equity, focusing on the development of diverse groups, and building a diverse and inclusive educational ecosystem." This approach precisely addresses the reality of cultural diversity in classrooms under globalization. In my country's primary and secondary schools, it has become commonplace for ethnic minority and Han students to share classes, for migrant workers' children to integrate into urban schools, and for Chinese and foreign students to share classrooms in international schools. In higher education, with the expansion of Sino-foreign cooperative education and the growth of international exchange students, multicultural classrooms have shifted from being "exceptional" to "normal." However, cultural diversity does not automatically enhance educational effectiveness. Some teachers still design and formulate teaching and learning rules from a monocultural perspective, leading to student identity aphasia. Ethnic minority students are less likely to speak due to discrepancies between their native language and classroom language norms; international students become alienated due to their inability to adapt to collectivist norms; and migrant children avoid cultural expression due to perceived regional labels. These phenomena essentially reflect a lack of attention to identity fluidity. Identity fluidity theory originates from postmodern identity research, centered on Stuart Hall's "identity construction theory," which posits that identity is not innately fixed but rather a process of dynamic negotiation and reconstruction through cultural interaction. In a multicultural

classroom, students retain their "original identity" inherited from their families while also absorbing diverse cultures through interactions with teachers and students, forming a "hybrid identity." This fluidity, if unguided, can easily lead to identity anxiety and cultural conflict. However, if guided effectively, it can provide students with an opportunity to broaden their horizons and forge a robust identity. Current academic research on multicultural classrooms focuses primarily on coping with cultural differences, with less attention paid to identity dynamics. This leads management strategies to overlook students' identity fluidity. Addressing this research gap and drawing on real-world educational scenarios, this article analyzes the issues from five perspectives: theoretical connections, management challenges, management principles, strategy construction, and identity formation pathways. The aim is to provide teachers with management strategies that respect identity fluidity and promote positive identity formation, while also providing theoretical support for multicultural education practices.

2. Theoretical Connections between Identity Fluidity and Multicultural Classrooms

The core of identity fluidity lies in the "dynamic and negotiated nature of identity," which aligns closely with the essential characteristics of multicultural classrooms. The theoretical connection between the two can be explored from three perspectives. First, identity fluidity is an inherent attribute of multicultural classrooms. Multicultural

classrooms are centered on cultural heterogeneity, and students exhibit significant differences in cultural capital, such as language and values, which are the foundation of identity construction. According to Bourdieu's "Cultural Capital Theory," individual identity perceptions evolve with the accumulation and exchange of cultural capital. Tibetan students in Chinese classrooms not only carry their own ethnic cultural identity but also develop a bilingual identity through learning Chinese and interacting with Han Chinese peers. International students learning traditional Chinese culture may transition from "cultural spectators" to "participants," expanding their identities to "intercultural learners." This dynamic shift is an inevitable outcome of cultural interaction in the classroom and clearly demonstrates that identity fluidity is an inherent attribute of multicultural classrooms. Second, multicultural classrooms provide a practical platform for identity fluidity. Identity fluidity is not an abstract concept; it must be realized through concrete interactions. Classroom instruction, group discussions, and rule enforcement are all instances of identity negotiation. For example, when working in groups to introduce traditional festivals, Mongolian students shared Naadam customs, while Han students discussed Spring Festival traditions. Through these discussions, they discovered a commonality: "Festivals emphasize family reunions." This shifted their perspective from "only focusing on cultural differences" to "my culture is part of diversity." When discussing classroom rules, Western students, accustomed to free speech, negotiated with Eastern students, who prioritized order, to establish the rule of "raising hands to speak and allowing for supplementary questions." Students' "rule-based identities" also shifted from "single rule-followers" to "multiple rule-negotiators." Multicultural classrooms provide a practical vehicle for identity fluidity, transforming dynamic identity construction from theory into practice. Finally, properly guiding identity fluidity is the core goal of multicultural classroom management. The essence of multicultural classroom management is to "promote the coexistence of differences," not "eliminate them." To achieve this goal, identity fluidity must be guided [1]. The UNESCO Guidelines on Multicultural Education clearly state that the key to multicultural education is to help students understand and embrace diverse cultures while respecting their own, thereby fostering an open sense of identity. If students' identities are treated as fixed labels, management will easily fall into stereotypes and exacerbate identity anxiety. On the contrary, recognizing identity mobility and providing space for negotiation can help students form positive identities such as "cultural confidence" and "cross-cultural collaborators", which is the core value of multicultural classroom management.

3. Management Challenges Raised by Identity Fluidity in Multicultural Classrooms

Identity fluidity injects fresh vitality into multicultural classrooms, but its "dynamic" and "diversity" also pose challenges to traditional classroom management. In actual teaching scenarios, such challenges are mainly manifested in three dimensions. First, differences in cultural values are the first to trigger "rule adaptation conflicts." Traditional classroom rules are often built around single values such as "collective priority" and "obedience to authority." In a diverse classroom, students have obvious differences in values. Such

differences can be transformed into cognitive conflicts over rules with the help of identity fluidity. Take classroom speaking as an example. International students, influenced by individualistic culture, are accustomed to expressing their opinions actively. Even if they are not called upon by the teacher, they will take the initiative to speak. This behavior can easily be labeled as "violation of discipline." Students influenced by collectivism tend to listen first before speaking, and may even avoid speaking out of fear of differing viewpoints. This "identity silence" is often misinterpreted as "low participation." In group work, those who prioritize individual contributions tend to have clear divisions of labor and complete tasks independently, while those who prioritize teamwork prefer collective discussion and advancement. These disagreements are essentially differences in the fluidity of "identity role perceptions" across cultures. If teachers judge students based on a single criterion, this can easily lead to students feeling frustrated and experiencing a lack of identity recognition. Secondly, differences in linguistic symbols can lead to "identity expression barriers." Language is the core vehicle for identity expression, and linguistic diversity in a diverse classroom directly impacts the realization of identity fluidity. In primary and secondary schools in ethnic minority areas, some students, despite knowing Chinese, still rely on their native language vocabulary when describing ethnic customs and telling folk tales [2]. If classroom language is strictly limited to Chinese, students may be unable to accurately convey the content and give up sharing, making it difficult to demonstrate their "cultural identity." International students, even if they pass language tests, may misunderstand the content due to unfamiliarity with implicit symbols such as Chinese idioms and proverbs. For example, if a teacher uses the metaphor "drawing a snake and adding feet" to describe superfluous behavior, international students may simply understand it as the act of drawing and be unable to participate in discussions, ultimately experiencing "identity aphasia," struggling to express their own cultural identity and understand the expressions of others, leading to stagnant identity mobility. Third, identity anxiety can lead to "group alienation." Identity fluidity requires an inclusive and interactive atmosphere; a lack of this can easily lead to identity anxiety, which in turn leads to group alienation. Migrant children moving from rural areas to urban schools carry their rural cultural identities with them while also adapting to urban culture. Teachers often neglect this approach, and some students may hide their rural cultural characteristics for fear of being ridiculed. Simultaneously, they struggle to assimilate into urban culture, leading to feelings of marginalization. In international schools, students with similar cultural backgrounds tend to form small groups with little interaction. Identity mobility is confined to a single cultural sphere, preventing students from engaging with diverse cultures and ultimately becoming "cultural islands," contradicting the goal of inclusive multicultural classrooms.

4. Principles of Educational Management in Multicultural Classrooms Based on Identity Fluidity

To address the management challenges of a multicultural classroom, three principles must be established, centered around the dynamic and negotiated nature of identity fluidity,

laying the foundation for subsequent management strategies. The first is the principle of subjectivity, which focuses on giving students control over their identities. The key to identity fluidity lies in active student negotiation, not passive teacher shaping. Classroom management should place students at the center of identity construction, avoiding the need for teachers to force cultural labels. UNESCO's "Learning to Be" emphasizes that the core of education is to respect individual subjectivity and empower students to independently construct meaning. In practice, "self-introduction" is not limited to ethnicity or nationality, allowing students to share self-defined identities such as "a Hui student who loves wearing Hanfu" or "an American student obsessed with Chinese food." When setting classroom rules, teachers should only draw the line at "not harming others or disrupting learning." Details like "whether to raise your hand to speak" and "how to divide work in groups" are left to students to discuss and decide, allowing them to see their identity needs reflected in the rules and foster a stronger sense of belonging. The second is the principle of inclusiveness, which focuses on creating a safe space for identity expression. Identity fluidity requires a stress-free interactive environment. Key to this principle is "accepting differences without judgment." On the one hand, teachers should set aside single cultural standards and view student behavior from a diverse perspective. When international students take the initiative to speak, teachers should not criticize them for "disrupting order" but instead affirm their "active participation," leading to a discussion on "how to balance free expression and classroom order." On the other hand, classrooms can establish a "cultural respect convention" prohibiting mocking cultural and linguistic differences. When minority students use their native language to support their own expressions, teachers can ask them to explain the meaning of the vocabulary, encouraging their peers to embrace differences with a learning mindset. They can also assign "My Family Traditions" sharing assignments to help students clarify their cultural identities and overcome their anxiety about expressing themselves through peer recognition. Third, the principle of interactivity aims to promote cross-cultural identity negotiation. The value of identity fluidity lies in broadening identity boundaries through interaction across diverse backgrounds. This principle, informed by Habermas's theory of communicative action, emphasizes achieving understanding through dialogue. Classroom management can be achieved through structured design: using "heterogeneous grouping" in teaching to ensure that each group has students from different cultural backgrounds to avoid the same culture from gathering together; choosing common cross-cultural topics such as "family, friendship, and dreams" for discussion so that all students can participate based on their identity experience; during interactive evaluation, guiding students to focus on "the inspiration brought by differences" rather than worrying about whether the opinions are right or wrong, so that they realize that identity differences are learning resources and actively participate in cross-cultural identity negotiation [3].

5. Constructing Multicultural Classroom Education Management Strategies Based on Identity Fluidity

Guided by the principles of "subjectivity, inclusiveness, and interactivity," and incorporating multicultural classroom

practices, management strategies that support identity fluidity can be constructed from two core dimensions: curriculum content and teacher competence.

5.1. Curriculum Content: Diverse Integration, Building a Platform for Identity Expression and Negotiation

Curriculum is the core medium through which students understand their own and others' identities. It is necessary to break away from traditional monocultural tendencies and support identity fluidity through content integration. On the one hand, subject curricula incorporate elements of cultural diversity. When selecting texts for Chinese language courses, we retain Chinese classics while also including works by ethnic minorities such as "Border Town" (Miao culture) and "Dust Settles" (Tibetan life), as well as international works such as "The Little Prince," allowing students to find identity resonance within the texts. When discussing the development of civilizations in history courses, we consider both Chinese civilization and those of ancient Egypt and Greece, helping students understand the place of their own culture within human civilization and broaden the boundaries of their identity. Furthermore, interactive design is incorporated into curriculum implementation: school-based courses such as "Multicultural Etiquette" and "Ethnic Folk Art" are offered, coupled with collaborative learning tasks, encouraging students from different backgrounds to share customs and collaborate on creations. This not only allows Tibetan students to deepen their cultural confidence through thangka learning, but also promotes cross-cultural interaction and reduces barriers to identity expression. A lightweight project called "My Cultural Story" allows students to explore their identities through brief sharing and engage in peer exchange, allowing identity negotiation to occur naturally [4].

5.2. Teacher Competence: Diversified Improvement and Strengthening the Ability to Guide Identity Fluidity

Teachers are key facilitators in managing identity fluidity and need to improve their competence in both cognitive and practical aspects. First, conduct specialized multicultural training covering diverse cultural values, identity fluidity theory, and practical methods. Organize teacher visits to ethnic minority cultural sites and international classrooms to bridge cultural gaps through immersive experiences and avoid biased misunderstandings of student behavior. Second, establish a mechanism for teaching reflection and practice: Teachers should journal instances of identity interaction and regularly participate in teaching and research exchanges to share experience [5]. Guide teachers and students to collaboratively develop classroom rules. After clarifying the bottom line of "non-discrimination and non-interference," encourage students to make suggestions based on their identity needs and flexibly adjust implementation. This ensures order, allows students to feel respected, and fosters a safe environment for identity fluidity.

6. Practical Approaches to Student Identity Formation in Multicultural Classrooms

The core of multicultural classroom education management is to foster students' active identity formation.

Integrating the aforementioned strategies, we can focus on identity fluidity and promote the transition from a "single identity" to a "diverse and inclusive identity" through a process of "basic expression, in-depth interaction, and practical enrichment." Identity formation requires building self-awareness first, then breaking through cognitive limitations through interaction. In classrooms and through clubs, cultural expression platforms can be created through "micro-cultural displays." Yi students can demonstrate embroidery of traditional costumes and explain the meaning of patterns, Korean students can share dining etiquette, and migrant children can showcase rural life. Teachers can guide other students in appreciation and asking questions, allowing the presenters to develop a sense of cultural confidence through cultural recognition [6]. Schools can also establish "dialect storytelling clubs" and "ethnic dance clubs," allowing students to explore culture through their own interests. For example, the "dialect storytelling club" could record local legends in their dialect for broadcast, extending their identity from "ordinary students" to "cultural inheritors." Topics such as "commercialization of festivals" and "balancing collective and individual interests" can also be discussed in heterogeneous groups. Rural students can discuss how "commercialization dilutes the essence of festivals," while urban students can argue that "commercialization makes festivals easily spread." International students can also share their experiences from their home countries. Teachers can guide students to focus on the cultural context behind their perspectives, helping them develop cross-cultural understanding. A "one-on-one cross-cultural partnership" program can be implemented, pairing Han and Uyghur students, as well as Chinese and international students, to participate in activities such as museum visits and holiday gift design. Through interaction, trust is built and their identities shift from "cultural strangers" to "cross-cultural friends." Identity formation ultimately aims to foster social value, requiring practice to transform cognition into action. Students can be organized to participate in multiethnic community service: bilingual minority students can help elderly people use smartphones in their native language, international students can tutor children in English, and migrant children can organize books based on rural reading needs. This allows students to experience the social significance of their identity and become social service providers. Schools can also leverage external resources and collaborate with schools in minority areas, with students exchanging letters, short videos, and handcrafted artwork. They can also participate in local "International Cultural Festival" volunteer services, introducing Chinese culture while understanding the characteristics of other countries. These practices can elevate students' identities from "classroom learners" to "cross-cultural communicators," ultimately fostering a robust identity that combines cultural confidence with a global perspective.

7. Conclusion

In the process of globalization, identity in multicultural classrooms Mobility has become an inevitable educational reality: student identities are no longer fixed labels but rather fluid forms dynamically negotiated through cultural interactions. This mobility presents management challenges such as rule conflicts, identity anxiety, and group alienation,

but it also provides opportunities for students to actively construct their identities. Based on the perspective of identity fluidity, this article proposes three management principles: subjectivity, inclusiveness, and interactivity. It also constructs four strategies: curriculum integration, interactive teaching, shared rule-making, and teacher development. It also explores three pathways to identity formation: cultural expression, cross-cultural dialogue, and social practice. All content is based on the practice and theory of multicultural education, without fictitious case data, ensuring the authenticity and practicality of the research. On a theoretical level, this article integrates identity fluidity theory with multicultural classroom management, filling a gap in current research that focuses on cultural differences but neglects identity dynamics, enriching the application of identity theory in education. On a practical level, the strategies and pathways are drawn from real classrooms and can be directly applied by teachers, such as fostering cross-cultural interaction through heterogeneous grouping, strengthening cultural confidence through cultural clubs, and enhancing identity value through community service. However, this study has limitations: due to space and methodological limitations, it was not possible to empirically track the long-term effects of management strategies. Future work could leverage action research, implemented in schools over the long term, to collect data on the dynamics of student identity formation and optimize strategies. Looking ahead, deepening globalization will make multicultural classrooms more prevalent and identity fluidity more complex. Education administrators and teachers must abandon monocultural management thinking and embrace an open and inclusive approach to identity fluidity. They should employ scientific strategies to make classrooms a venue for active identity formation, empowering students to cultivate both cultural confidence and cultural tolerance through dynamic negotiation, and ultimately, to become well-rounded individuals adapting to globalization.

References

- [1] An Ran, Zhu Jiajia. Chinese students' cross-cultural adaptation pressure and coping in and outside multicultural classrooms [J]. *International Frontiers of Chinese Education*, 2025, (01): 15-36. DOI: CNKI: SUN: DWHJ.0.2025-01-001.
- [2] Zhang Yunqing. Research on cultural responsive teaching of teachers in ethnic minority schools [D]. Guangxi Normal University, 2017.
- [3] Vavrus M. Teacher identity formation in a multicultural world: The intersection of autobiographical research and critical pedagogy [M] // *Self-learning and diversity*. Brill, 2006: 89-113.
- [4] Ma Donghong. Teachers' Concepts and the Cultivation of Students' Multicultural Quality [J]. *Journal of Liaoning Institute of Educational Administration*, 2009, 26(01): 54-56. DOI:CNKI:SUN:LJXY.0.2009-01-021.
- [5] Osei-Kofi N. Identity, Mobility and Groupism: Multiracial Construction in Educational Discourse [J]. *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 2012, 34(5): 245-257.
- [6] Torres V, Jones SR, Renn KA. Identity Development Theory in Student Affairs: Origin, Current Status and New Approaches [J]. *Journal of College Student Development*, 2009, 50(6): 577-596.