



ethnic
communities'
council of
victoria

KALEIDOSCOPIK KULTURES

Exploring the Self-Identity
of Young People in a
Multicultural and Globalised Society

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Summary of Research
Paper 2010



Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) Inc. was established in 1974 as a voluntary community based organisation.

35 years later, ECCV is a broadly based, statewide, peak advocacy body representing ethnic and multicultural communities in Victoria.

ECCV's role includes supporting, consulting, liaising with and providing information to Victoria's ethnic communities.

ECCV delivers policy projects for key partners in areas like multicultural policy, aged care programs and skilled migration strategies.

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Summary

It is important that we as a community consider strategies aimed at improving the sense of belonging and the participation of today's youth in a globalised and multicultural Australia. The multiple and ever-changing character of today's youth identities is a key factor that needs to be acknowledged and understood so that we can deal adequately with the complex nature of identity within Australia's multicultural sphere.

Young Australians and ethnic youth in particular define themselves and their relationships using fluid and reworked factors which offer a new perspective on the concept of Australian identity. This perspective is shaped by: the notion of multiculturalism that has been embedded in young people's consciousness in Australia; the phenomenon of hybridity within ethnicity (ethnic youth identifying with groups that constitute their heritage or with a distinct cultural group); mobility (including the circumstances surrounding migration, the reduced cost of global travel, and the accelerating rate of cross-border exchanges); and the globalisation of the world's economy (engendering new technologies and the growing international marketplace). It is puzzling that a general understanding of minority young people's cultural identities remains limited and that current theories of identity development fail to acknowledge the validity and adaptability of fluid identities. The multifaceted nature of young people's cultural identity is also absent from the majority of discourses concerning young people in Australia.

The aim of this research is to stimulate discussion on the issue of cultural identity in a globalised world, with a focus on young people, especially those from ethnic minority groups. The research intended to explore the nature of the interactions between a range of environmental factors and the degree to which they influence identity formation in youth. The paper also highlights implications for policy formulation so that optimal support can be provided to youth, enabling them to develop and express healthy self-identities.

The design of the right environment to encourage the healthy development of youth requires a change in: practices and policies within a range of settings (including familial relations, peers, schooling, and local ethnic community and neighbourhood networks); the interactions between those settings; and the ways in which conditions in particular settings or broader structures (such as technological development, the role of media, the impact of popular culture and social policies) can counteract negative effects from other settings.

Recommendations arising from this research focus on improving support for youth during adolescence in their exploration and expression of cultural identity. Thus, it is identified that transformation is required in each of the environmental settings we explore.

In terms of the family environment, it is important to work with the family unit to facilitate ongoing family connections, and to enhance the family's capacity to provide adequate support for young people.

In relation to the environment of friends and peers, it is crucial to create opportunities for meaningful social interactions through inclusive events, programs and services which engage youth in common activities that promote cross-cultural understanding amongst a range of peers from their ethnic and broader wider community.



As to the school environment, it is vital to create a localised school culture that values cultural differences and encourages the discussion and celebration of multicultural self-identities.

In terms of the local community network, it is essential that young members can express their identities without judgement. This could be facilitated by challenging the distribution of power often evident between different generations within the same ethnic community.

Improvement in the connections between the family and the wider social network is also needed to develop consistent and supportive environments for youth, which enable an interchange of ideas and understanding so that they can safely cultivate and express their developing identities.

In the immediate neighbourhood setting, urban planners need to plan for greater ethnic diversity in localities across the nation. Diverse communities are likely to use a wider combination of ethnic labels in such settings, which enhances a greater awareness of their own ethnic identity and assists them in formulating an independent national identity.

Free exploration and expression of the self can also be encouraged within environments that acknowledge and develop resilience in youth, as this improves their ability to construct healthy, authentic and confident identities. This process can be facilitated by supporting young people's active involvement in the collective construction of social meaning around identity, which can in turn influence and inform policies that shape their lives. Giving primacy to the perspectives, interpretations and lived experiences of youth, and tapping into the meanings they attach to their experiences, ensures their inclusion in formulating public policies that directly relate to them. The inclusion of voices of all ages, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds is vital to this discussion, including Anglo-Australian youth and others traditionally excluded from the multicultural arena.

The discourse around Australian identity adopted when drafting social policy also needs to reflect the reality that identity is no longer confined to one's heritage and past. Competing pressures on, and expectations of, minority youth frequently differ between cultural spaces and public spaces. These multiple influences result in an evolved notion of cultural identity that comprises a combination of elements drawn from ancestral, mainstream and extraneous cultures. Thus, the public sphere needs to move beyond the narrow labelling of youth groups as Anglo, CALD, ethnic, migrant and refugee, to instead match these conceptualisations to the way young Australians view their self-identity. Furthermore, the reality of newly created hybrid identities and a multicultural youth subculture must be reflected in the public language used by social institutions when addressing youth.

Direct involvement of young people in the creative arts and the media is a strategy that can provide youth with opportunities to explore their identities collectively, and produce public expressions of these identities, and thus share them with the wider society. A complementary strategy might also include initiating an open and inclusive discussion of contemporary cultural diversity, by which youth would be encouraged to share their unique perspectives, through the use of less traditional consultative practices such as using social networking sites, blogs and visual art-based outlets.

Today's youth are part of a dynamic world of intercultural exchanges and fusions of fluid identities. In this context, it is often difficult to establish the source of their original culture and to speak of specific cultures in isolation. The characteristics of young people and their cultures have changed over time, in response to shifting circumstances that assist them in navigating the complex diversities of their world and in negotiating



their sense of belonging within Australia. Thus, the active roles young people can play in affecting their environment should be identified, respected and valued.

Our research paper is the first to respond to an identified conceptual gap between the interconnected issues of identity, biculturalism and belonging which have significant impacts on the wellbeing and settlement of Australian youth, particularly ethnic youth. The paper highlights the importance of supporting youth through environments that offer them the freedom to make their own choices and to have control over whether their chosen identity remains constant or switches between different masks to suit different settings. Due to time constraints, the study was limited to a comprehensive literature search. However, future research directions are discussed, noting the importance of undertaking further empirical investigations to validate the findings.

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