

ETHNIC EDUCATION FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY ENHANCEMENT

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The purpose of this study is to explore the ethnic identity enhancement process among Armenian children receiving ethnic education offered in Armenian schools in the United States. The study looks at how Armenian students enrolled in Armenian schools perceive their ethnic identities, and the conflicts and dilemmas they encounter in their interactions within the dominant American culture.

The Armenian School movement in North America (U.S. and Canada) is more than four decades old. The goal is to offer a rigorous American curriculum enriched with Armenian studies to challenge students to achieve a strong Armenian identity and pride.

The last four decades have seen great growth in Armenian communities as a direct result of increase in Armenian immigration to the United States. This growth had its impact on the ethnic consciousness of all Armenians. Furthermore, the open doors of the Motherland/Armenia, the immigration and the contact between previous and recent immigrants created instances for ethnic revitalization. Reinforced ethnic identity has thus become a real and relevant issue for the Armenian community in the United States.

The overall challenge in preservation their identity that Armenian immigrants encounter in the United States is the struggle against the assimilative forces. This struggle necessitates the enhancement of that identity among Armenian youth through education within the school and in community settings. It was the Armenian Church and the school that created an environment in which the Armenian young generation was given the chance to enhance their identity and national pride by stirring patriotic feelings and stressing the importance of keeping the Armenian language and culture alive.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity is an important part of a human being's overall identity. At different times and different circumstances, ethnic identity may be ignored or it may be preserved and enhanced by developing ethnic awareness and ethnic pride in the youth of an ethnic community.

Erik H. Erikson, in his study of "Eight Stages of Man", explains the importance of each period of life in the

formation of man's ego (whole) identity, and that each period is a gradual integration of all identifications. According to him, the ego identity is the sum of one's understandings of his uniqueness and appropriate childhood experiences.

Ethnic awareness is one identification that can accom-



The famous French Armenian singer Charles Aznavour's visit to Jerusalem's St. Tarkmantchats school filled the hearts of the students with great pride and sense of belonging.

pany the development of ego identity in all stages (childhood to old age). Thus the early exposure to these experiences -home, family, language, food, music, traditions and other experiences at home may have strong impact on the young generation's ethnic (Armenian) identity development. Since one's ethnic affiliation is one of many components of man's ego identity (and accompanies it in its all stages), belonging to the ethnic group and its culture is very important for existence and survival in any society.

Researchers point out **objective and subjective aspects** for the concept of ethnic identity.

— **Objective** definitions of ethnic identity are overt features of the ethnic group - cultural characteristics, language, customs, traditions, geological distinctiveness, understanding culture, and identification with their ancestors and communities. These characteristics are subject to change, even to extinct.

— **Subjective** definitions of ethnic identity are a process by which individuals identify themselves as being different from others and are identified as different by others. These definitions are based on self-concept, feelings, understanding and internalizing beliefs and culture, and identification with their communities and ancestors. Subjective definitions are used more to define ethnicity in multiethnic societies (United States), where immigrants, confronted by the reality of the dominant culture try to preserve their beliefs in their common descent and ethnicity.

These definitions of ethnic identity enlighten us about

one important point; we must take into consideration both, objective and subjective criteria of the phenomenon when defining our Armenian ethnic Identity.

Another research on **Persistent Identity Systems** (E. Spicer) indicates that different ethnic groups have survived over long periods of time among other cultures, having undergone different religious, political and economic pressures. The findings of this research assert that participation in three areas is necessary for the persistence of ethnic identity systems:

- believing in their history, knowing their culture, sharing religious and moral values in inter-ethnic interactions;
- communicating through language to create unity within the identity system. The language is viewed as a powerful means for preserving the ethnic identity, as an attachment to the motherland and to their own people;
- participating in social and political activities of the ethnic group in order to preserve the identity system in the face of the oppositional situations in pluralistic societies.

Spicer's theory could explain the preservation of our Armenian identity in United States. Armenians form strong communities with their churches, day schools, Saturday and Sunday schools, community centers, philanthropic organizations, cultural and political associations. Therefore, we can participate in more than one of the areas that Spicer identifies; communicating through mother tongue, sharing the same moral values, Christian belief and culture, and participating in political, social and philanthropic organizations for achieving our objectives and goals in the Diaspora.

Armenian people are very sensitive to their identity. During their turbulent history, they often had to face losing everything; their land and their togetherness as a nation. Finally, the Armenian Genocide by Turkish government at the dawn of the twentieth century triggered Armenian mass immigration and formation of the Diaspora in the United States and the world. These devastating circumstances made Armenians more possessive about their primordial ties and preservation of their national identity.

There are other factors contributing to the preservation and maintenance of our Armenian identity;

- Visitation to the motherland and communi-

cation with the Armenian people

-- Armenian immigration that is a major factor in the revitalization of Armenian identity in the Diaspora.

--The advancement of technology that crosses the barriers between our Motherland and the Armenian Diaspora around the world.

-- The Armenian pride--**the Armenian pride is the heritage of each and every Armenian. It is the savoring remembrance of their past and more importantly, it is the promise of their future.**

Finally, a person does not belong to an ethnic group by choice. He is born into it and is related to it through emotional and symbolic ties, therefore the Armenian Identity is our **birth right**.



The Armenian youth in the diaspora demand justice and recognition of the Armenian Genocide

Identity Questionnaire

(Questionnaire for the Armenian youth)

I consider myself Armenian, because:

- I feel good about my Armenian cultural background.
- I feel strong sense of belonging to my own Armenian ethnic group.
- I have pride in my ethnic group and its accomplishments.
- I understand what my Armenian ethnicity means to me, and I know how to relate to my own and other ethnic groups.
- I often talk to other people about my Armenian background.
- I do research to learn about my own ethnic group, its history, culture, traditions and customs.
- I am Christian, I go to church every Sunday and I pray in Armenian.
- I would like to marry an Armenian.

- I speak Armenian.
- I have distinctive Armenian features - a beaky nose and beautiful almond-shaped eyes.
- I am active in organizations, community and political life of my Armenian ethnic group.
- I participate in the cultural life of my community-- I do volunteer work.
- I do research to find out about my own ethnic group's beliefs, history, traditions and customs.
- I am Armenian and enjoy being around people from ethnic groups other than my own.
- I do not speak Armenian, but participate in the Armenian cultural life, attend the church, go to various gatherings, and I have Armenian friends.
- I am Christian, with strong Armenian values. I speak Armenian and I have strong attachments to my community and my homeland.
- I am Christian, I speak Armenian, but I don't know anything about my history and culture.
- I know who I am, I have a clear sense of my Armenian ethnic background and what it means to me, I present myself to others with confidence and pride and try to learn about their culture.
- My last name ends with "ian", and I eat *dolma*, *pilaf*, and *khovradz*.(*)
- I do not speak Armenian, but I am Christian, I participate in the Armenian cultural life. I am a member of Armenian political and cultural organizations, attend various functions, and have Armenian friends.

Please find the statement(s) that describes your Armenian identity. Can you consider yourself Armenian with only one statement?

--Yes, why? ,

--No, why?

Write your own understanding of the Armenian identity and share it with us.

The questionnaire is from "An International Journal of Theory and Research"

(The questionnaire is modified by Dr. E.A.)

It is important to look at how Armenian children, who attend Armenian schools perceive their ethnic identities. The information about how the students feel about themselves, their friends, their overall education, their culture, and their loyalties was collected and analyzed so that the issues and conflicts which these students face in the process of ethnic identity enhancement could be assessed and described.

(*) *dolma*, stuffed squash, eggplant, grape leaves or cabbage

pilaf, rice or bulgur

khovradz, roast meat and chicken (kebab)

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Keep the Armenian identity alive



Armenian school in Aleppo, 2016.

"I feel strong sense of belonging to my own Armenian ethnic group."