

2025

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Recommended Citation

Campana, C., & Leao, P. (2025) "Unpacking Identity Work Mechanisms for a Person-Centered Approach to Business and Management Education," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*: Vol. 36 : Iss 1, Article 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/1812-9129.1050>

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Cover Page Footnote

We thank Caio Coelho and Marina Henriques Viotto for their contribution to the data collection and the initial conception of this research.

Teaching and Learning

Unpacking Identity Work Mechanisms for a Person-Centered Approach to Business and Management Education

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Keywords: Identity work, Business Education, Higher Education, Person Centered Approach

International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Vol. 36, Issue 1, 2025

We explore identity work among undergraduate business students who resist the identity prevailing in traditional business schools. The study investigates an educational program that fosters identity work, allowing students to add facets to their emergent identity. Through in-depth interviews, the researchers uncovered a process in which students resist the hegemonic identity of business administrators, seeking alternative experiences that redefine their identity. Our research contribution is two-fold. First, we extend the concept of identity workspaces by introducing three mechanisms: autonomy, a psychological safe space, and group embeddedness. These mechanisms enable students to engage in an identity work process and reidentify with their business and management courses. Second, we show that the concept of a dichotomy between a real self and a fake self must be overcome in favor of a multifaceted conception of identity. The study also offers valuable insights for educators, practitioners, and policymakers, encouraging initiatives that support multifaceted identities in the educational context by adopting new learning and teaching methodologies.

Introduction

Identity can be defined as an individual's subjective interpretation of who they are "based on their socio-demographic characteristics, roles, personal attributes, and group memberships" (Caza et al., 2018, p. 889). This interpretation can be shaped through the process of identity work in which individuals reflexively attach subjective meanings to "their selves" (Brown, 2019; Brown et al., 2021). While the concepts are interrelated, identity and identity work differ from identification, which refers to a perceived sense of unity or belonging to a group or organization (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). For instance, a student's identity may encompass how they see themselves as a learner, shaped over time through identity work such as navigating academic challenges and developing a sense of purpose, while their identification with the university reflects a felt connection to its values, community, and reputation.

Scholars have suggested that the educational setting lends itself well to developing students' identity work and that the development of a professional identity acts as a bridge between higher education and future employability (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). This study aims to offer a better understanding of how a person-centered educational approach can enable reidentification and identity work among students in the domain of business and management education. The paper describes and discusses the identity work process experienced by undergraduate students who have resisted the hegemonic characteristics of the traditional business school environment and proposes

mechanisms that facilitate identity work in the educational context.

Studies on business education have focused on education in leadership, entrepreneurship, engineering, and business (Danielsson et al., 2019; Frederiksen & Berglund, 2020; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, 2015; Siivonen et al., 2020). However, little research has been conducted that examines identity work in non-traditional programs or investigates how identity work unfolds in students in a field that is the subject of criticism for its perceived lack of identity and legitimacy (Beech et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2013) a gap that this study seeks to address.

Beyond predicates such as innovation, success, progress, and social and economic development, the identity fostered by the business education field is also marked by labels such as competitiveness, fraud, inequality, and technicism (Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2015; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Blasco, 2022; Thomas et al., 2013). Previous research suggests that business students are likely to cheat significantly more than other college students, are more likely to act in a self-interested way in social dilemmas (Parks-Leduc et al., 2021), and have narcissistic tendencies such as materialistic values (Bergman et al., 2010). Blasco (2022), for instance, demonstrated that the disciplinary specialization in business education can affect the students' sense of responsibility and lead them to ideate justifications for their moral disengagement. All these characteristics are part of the identity work process.

In-depth interviews were conducted with all students enrolled in a Brazilian education program that employs a person-centered approach, which differs from the pedagog-

ical methodology used in traditional higher education. The program investigated focuses on projects in which the students are encouraged to exercise and further develop skills such as autonomy, leadership, communication, teamwork, and active listening.

The results in this case show that the identity work process started with a dynamic in which students disidentified with and resisted the prevalent identity fostered by traditional business programs. Consequently, they sought an alternative route in which they were exposed to new educational experiences. This alternate route allowed them to add new facets to their emergent identity. In this process, three main mechanisms emerged as enabling the students' identity work: autonomy, a psychological safe space, and group embeddedness (Rogers, 1951/2003).

This paper contributes to the literature on identity work theory and business education. First, it extends the concept of identity workspaces proposed by Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) by introducing three mechanisms operating within a non-traditional business and management education program that enable students to embark on an identity work process and reidentify with their business and management undergraduate courses. Second, it adopts the view that the widely perceived dichotomy between a real self and a fake self must be overcome in favor of a crystallized conception of identity, one composed of multiple facets like a crystal (Gergen, 1991; Huber & Knights, 2022; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). The paper argues that not all identity work undertaken by business and management students serves the aim of adapting to the values of managerialism and entrepreneurialism (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), highlighting instead how students seek out alternative experiences that support their identity work. Finally, it reinforces the view that educational initiatives promoting opportunities to amplify and refine diverse identity facets should be incentivized and strengthened.

Theoretical Overview

Identity Work

Identity work is a process that can happen at any time in life but is more likely to occur in transition phases, such as when students are transitioning to higher education and need to learn how to fit into their new environment (Ibarra, 1999). As highlighted by Fernando and Kenny (2021), identity work encompasses personal attributes, roles, and group memberships (Brown et al., 2021), and identity is construed through discourse enacted in the present moment (Brown, 2015) in relationship with others (Beech, 2008; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Identity work as a process is not hermetic or unidirectional but includes creating, presenting, sustaining, forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Some phenomena occurring in the identity work process that are relevant to the present research have been mapped by previous research. These include disidentification (Barros, 2018; Smith, 2017), resistance (Danielsson et al., 2019; Frederik-

sen & Berglund, 2020; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), and the coexistence of different facets of identity (Huber & Knights, 2022; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

In the identity work process, disidentification occurs when individuals attempt to separate their identity from specific characteristics that are prevalent in the environment they are, or, in the words of Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001, p. 393), "defining who you are by what you're not." Barros (2018), for example, explored how some journalists' lack of identification with attributes characteristic of the traditional media in Brazil led them to reshape their identities with new attributes and position themselves as progressive bloggers. Smith (2017) emphasizes how people seek to disidentify with characteristics that may stigmatize them.

According to Barros (2018, p. 2), the process of disidentification can be an opportunity to express resistance against "dominant subjectification" through a series of strategies such as irony, parody, and cynicism. Resistance is a complex form of identity work that takes on different configurations and functions to protect the self (Frederiksen & Berglund, 2020). Examples can be seen in the work of Smith (2017) in which a student expressed his resistance to the engineering student culture by seeking out social relationships outside his course, and in the research of Fernando and Kenny (2021) that shows how students can enact resistance by questioning and rejecting organizational practices. Tracy and Trethewey (2005, p. 171) suggested that "resistance lies in rebelling against how we have already been defined as individuals by discourse."

Given that identity work is inherently dynamic and open-ended, disidentification and resistance can be understood as generative moments that shape the reflexive construction of identity. Their value is not inherently positive or negative, but emerges from their situated effects – ranging from transformative reorientation to experiences of anxiety, disengagement, or stagnation – depending on the individual and the context.

The identity work that occurs in the movement between resistance and dominance allows the emergence of new facets of identity. Since identity is neither fixed nor stable, individuals can engage in identity work in the form of disidentification, resistance, and the creation of new, different, and preferred coexisting identities, but this should not be understood as the real self being in constant battle with the fake self, indeed, the authors suggest that this dichotomy should be abandoned. Rather than being a struggle between selves, identity is socially constructed, constituted by discourse and its effects (Huber & Knights, 2022; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Referring to the self as crystallized is one way of attaching a positive valence to multiple coexisting identities. Similar to a crystal with its multiple facets that combines complexity and beauty, the growth of a crystallized self occurs while a person is embedded within the tensions of conflicting discourses (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

Multidimensional identities are composed of various interconnected dimensions, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, social class, and culture (Jones &

McEwen, 2000; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). These dimensions intersect and influence one another, creating complexity and uniqueness. For example, being a woman can intertwine with other dimensions, such as being a black woman or a lesbian, highlighting the interdependence of these facets. While a multidimensional identity enables individuals to reconcile seemingly contradictory aspects of their lives, fostering a sense of wholeness through their diverse roles, it can also be a source of internal struggle when these facets come into tension. Foster (2019), for instance, discusses the case of a woman who, despite her strong qualifications, was denied promotion, illustrating the tension between her self-perception as a strong black woman and the external perception that she might be seen as threatening, forcing her to navigate the incongruity between her self and the imposed image. Similarly, workers in marginalized jobs often engage in compartmentalization, presenting an organizationally preferred persona to protect their private selves, thus highlighting a disconnect between their identity and the roles they are required to perform (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). These tensions, however, do not invalidate the concept of multidimensional identity; rather, they underscore its complexity and adaptability, demonstrating that identity is a dynamic construct continually negotiated in response to social and contextual demands.

Identity work and higher education. In the context of higher education, students usually experience significant changes as they are exposed to new demands, behaviors, and patterns (Fernando & Kenny, 2021). In this context, students are likely to define who they are (Ibarra, 1999), and this transitional and conflict-ridden phase is contributive to the development of a more intense and conscious identity work process (Elsbach, 2003; Snow & Anderson, 1987). In addition, higher educational institutions lend themselves as identity workspaces as the environment they offer provides elements that allow individuals to understand and shape themselves (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

According to Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010), three elements constitute an identity workspace. First, social defenses, which are “collective arrangements [...] created or used by an organization’s members as a protection” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 47) and promote identity stabilization. Second, sentient communities – systems in an organization aimed at satisfying emotional needs – that offer a sense of belonging and “facilitate identity consolidation or identity transition” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 50). Third, rites of passage – ceremonial events marking status transitions – that “facilitate the process of exploring and experimenting [...] during identity transitions” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 50).

The above resonates with the idea that business schools, with their strict institutional patterns, are unlikely to offer an approach that will fit all students during their journey. In this context, students may face the dilemma of either having to quit or to undergo identity work to fit into the institutional environment. Researchers have approached the process of fitting oneself into an educational environment from different angles, e.g., from a social-economic minority (Fernando & Kenny, 2021) and a gender perspective, the

latter both from a female (Barnard, 2019) and a male point of view (Danielsson et al., 2019).

Research has looked broadly at the institutional setup that prompts individuals to develop identity work. Danielsson and collaborators (2019) investigated the identity trajectories of engineering students, showing the importance of students identifying with certain elements of the program’s culture and the process of resistance that set in when this did not occur. Siivonen et al. (2020) studied the construction of a collective identity among the members of student entrepreneurship societies. They found that the group developed a cohesive identity and a shared narrative based on positive energy and thinking but struggled to identify and deal with potentially negative aspects of entrepreneurship, such as a susceptibility to risk. Also, in the area of entrepreneurship education, Frederiksen and Berglund (2020, p. 1) listed three practices that facilitated the construction of an entrepreneurial identity in students: “setting new rules to activate the entrepreneurial self,” “playing by the rules by figuring the script,” and “bending the rules protecting the self,” a practice in which resistance proved to be a significant concept.

Although these studies advance the understanding of the role of identity work in how students fit themselves into the educational structure (Caza et al., 2018; Fernando & Kenny, 2021), little is known about how different teaching and learning methods may facilitate this kind of process, despite its importance in engaging students in the learning process (Dean & Jolly, 2012). This is a critical aspect to be further investigated, as this process can form, repair, maintain, strengthen, or revise constructions of self to produce a sense of coherence and distinctiveness in students (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165).

The Person-Centered Approach in Education

The person-centered approach is a way of approaching human relationships in which an individual puts their cognitive and emotional skills at the service of another’s development, respecting their autonomy and believing that the perspective best suited to understanding an individual is their frame of reference. Created by Carl Rogers, it was the basis of his psychological clinic and since then has been extended to other relational fields, such as families, groups, and education (Hod & Ben-Zvi, 2018; Rogers, 1951/2003/1951).

Rogers criticized the established assumption that students would succeed if they followed their teachers’ guidance. This way of thinking led teachers to adopt a role based on their belief that the students need to be controlled and are unable to make their own decisions (Rogers, 1951/2003). This mindset towards education conflicts with the personality theory principles developed by Rogers. Three elements of this theory have implications for present research context. First, Rogers “holds an optimistic view of the potential of any human being” (Blackie et al., 2010, p. 638) and postulates that living beings, including humans under favorable conditions, tend towards self-preservation and evolution. Individuals direct their trajectory towards what they understand to be greater independence and seek

self-actualization. This inclination, which underlies the person-centered approach, was called by Rogers the actualizing tendency, which is not linear and entails difficulties, as people try to overcome challenges to reach a socially recognized maturity. This tendency also applies at the group level, where individual and collective needs are being worked out that may arise during the search for both the individual's and the group's self-evolution and greater independence (Rogers, 1951/2003).

The actualizing tendency has bearing on the educational context in that it assumes that each student is worthy of being valued and capable of guiding their choices and organizing themselves to achieve what is best for their development under the existing conditions. A pedagogy that respects this tendency is based on empathy and promotes strengthening the students' autonomy and the cognitive-affective equipment necessary for active and continuous learning (Rogers, 1951/2003).

Second, Rogers' personality theory postulates that individuals, when they are free from threats and embedded in relationships that promote trust, can develop a more realistic self-image. They also feel secure in being accepted as they are in all aspects of their personality. These conditions allow them to gradually process experiences that they were previously unaware of and restructure their identity to accommodate and incorporate new experiences (Rogers, 1951/2003). In the educational environment, this presupposes the adoption of unconditional positive regard, in other words, the construction of an environment free of threats and acceptance of the people who are part of it (Rogers, 1951/2003).

The third element refers to the role of the therapist (or teacher), who needs to systematically and cohesively practice the tenets they claim to represent, which encompass something Rogers called 'congruence' (Blackie et al., 2010; Rogers, 1951/2003/1951): to be effective, a teachers' professional stance and methodology must be firmly rooted in their values. When this is not the case, they lose credibility, as the students can easily perceive the dissonance between what they preach and what they do. A teacher, for example, who claims to believe in students making their own choices but deprives them of the freedom to make any educational decisions is incongruent.

Congruence is practiced as relationships are formed within the educational context. These relationships can be teacher-student or student-student dyads or even group interactions. Safeguarded by the actualizing tendency and unconditional positive regard, an individual acts congruently when expressing recurrent feelings and thoughts arising from their relationship with another person. Being aware of the feelings their behavior evokes and reflecting on self-responsibility in relationships is one source of personal development (Hod & Ben-Zvi, 2018).

The person-centered approach guides the practice of psychologists and teachers until this day (Blackie et al., 2010; Hod & Ben-Zvi, 2018; Swan et al., 2020). Many studies on its efficacy were conducted between 1960 and 1970 (Heim, 2012). Although there are not many studies based on Rogers' ideas in the fields of learning and management

research, it should be noted that his assumptions inspired formats such as problem-based learning and experiential learning (Heim, 2012). Blackie et al. (2010) reinforce the notion of student-centeredness, a threshold concept that inspired profound changes in pedagogy and teaching training.

Swan et al. (2020) explored the points of contact between Carl Rogers' work on person-centered education and the community of inquiry framework – a model of online and blended learning – in the context of online higher education. The results suggested that these concepts can help operationalize practical ways to enhance teaching presence in online courses. Hod and Ben-Zvi (2018, p. 612) also investigated person-centered education integrated with knowledge-building communities' model, exploring how they may lend themselves to the co-development of "knowledge, experience, and self" and identifying patterns that allow this to happen. In another study, Heim (2012) presented a model for facilitating group tutoring in university-level humanities subjects grounded in Carl Rogers' principles, which includes a non-directive approach, climate-setting, facilitation, reflective listening, and positive regard. The results showed that this model contributed to dynamic learning, self-directedness, and the development of critical thinking skills.

The person-centered approach takes the self as the reference point. This means the focus is on the self, whether the context is individual or group therapy or any other expanded context. The goal is the individual's self-actualization, which is always directed at greater flexibility, autonomy, self-acceptance, and creativity (Rogers, 1972). However, this does not mean that the group or the context is not essential. The group plays a central role in Rogers' theory. It is configured as an "exemplary social activity designed to realize this goal, allow people to remove the impediments to growth as they intentionally transform themselves through engagement in shared activities, reflection, and interpersonal feedback" (Hod & Ben-Zvi, 2018, p. 597). For Rogers, both therapy and education are learning processes that lead to a greater integrated understanding of oneself, one's relationship with others, and the world at large (Rogers, 1951/2003).

Despite its widespread influence, the person-centered approach, have been the subject of criticism. Scholars argue that their ontological foundations are overly individualistic, privileging a conception of the self as autonomous and pre-social, which may be ill-suited to addressing collective challenges. The approach has also been described as ethnocentric, grounded in Euro-American conceptions of the individual that do not translate easily to cultural contexts where interdependence is more salient. On a practical level, barriers to the person-centered approach include lack of conceptual clarity, institutional constraints, teacher preparedness, student resistance, and the misalignment pedagogy and assessment practices (Altena, 2017; Holdstock, 1997; Kirschner et al., 2006; Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2019).

The person-centered approach has had a significant influence on the development of student-centered learning,

with the terms “person-centered” and “student-centered” often used interchangeably. While Rogers’s contributions were pivotal in shaping its conceptualization, Student-centered learning constitutes a broader and more multifaceted construct, with historical roots that span millennia. It encompasses a plural tradition informed by progressive, humanistic, critical, constructivist, and adult education movements. Researchers who have written about the foundations of student-centered learning, such as Hoidn and Reusser (2021), Olsson et al. (2018), and Shah (2020), argue that substantial contributions to the understanding and practice of this approach can be traced to a diverse range of thinkers and educators, including Confucius, Socrates, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Fröbel, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Paulo Freire, Malcolm Knowles, and Jerome Bruner, among many others. This historical and theoretical breadth highlights the complexity and scope of the concept, setting it apart from Rogers’s more specific framework (Hoidn & Reusser, 2021; Olsson et al., 2018; Shah, 2020).

Methods

The study investigated an alternative higher educational program called Integrated Education for Entrepreneurial Leadership (Intent) that is based on the person-centered educational approach. To execute the investigation, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 19 students enrolled in the program in the first semester of 2021. This group of students was the eighth intake into the program. This setting allowed us to describe and discuss the identity work process experienced by a group of undergraduate students who resisted the hegemonic attributes that mark the business education field and to propose mechanisms that enabled their identity work in the educational context.

The Intent Program

Intent is a semester-long program offered to students enrolled in the sixth semester or up of a private business school in São Paulo, Brazil. The program is one of many electives available in the curriculum of the undergraduate course in business administration offered by this institution. Students who enroll in Intent replace their curriculum of traditional courses with one semester-long full-time course that aims to develop skills and competencies such as autonomy, leadership, communication, teamwork, and active listening through projects, practical activities, and reflection. It is offered to a maximum of 20 students who are selected by a committee composed of the team leaders and members of the previous team.

The program follows a person-centered, group-oriented, and experience-based approach. Pedagogically, it is rooted primarily in Carl Rogers’ person-centered theory (Rogers, 1951/2003). It is complemented by Pichon Riviére’s group process concept, which promotes a collaborative and participatory approach to learning (Pichon-Riviére, 1986), and by experiential learning, which guides the way the pro-

gram’s activities are set up – always starting with a practical experience (Kolb, 2015).

To foster students’ potential for self-actualization, the curriculum, while structured, remains open and adaptable. Students contribute by designing and leading team maintenance initiatives, such as managing social media, organizing events, and creating informational materials. One cycle is dedicated to an individual project of choice, and another to a consultancy project for a real company, with teams formed according to student interests. Teachers avoid micromanagement – there are no reading checks, attendance control, or tests. All academic issues are addressed collectively within the group.

Unconditional positive regard is built through dynamics, activities, and discussions about belonging, group values, commitment, compromise, and empathy. One example is the non-disclosure agreement, which aims to protect people who share personal information within the group. The program prioritizes the group’s characteristics, interests, and needs, following a collaborative and participatory learning approach. Congruence can be seen, for instance, when a student chooses not to fully engage in a task, believing it is the best decision for themselves. While the group respects individual choices and maintains a sense of belonging, it may also question the lack of participation based on shared values. In this tension between individual and collective interests, compromises are negotiated on both sides.

Classes take place from Monday to Thursday between 9 am and 4 pm in a large room equipped to accommodate different seating arrangements and setups. The more common layouts are circles and small groups. There are two basic roles within the program: the teachers, who are referred to as “team leaders,” and the students, who are referred to as “team members.” Each intake of the program is considered a different team. The team leaders are responsible for designing and maintaining a learning space that draws on the group’s shared experience. The team members are encouraged to develop their individual or group projects independently.

The evaluation of team members consists of three main components; each connected to one of the three cycles that make up the program. In Cycle 1, the students develop activities aimed at team development. Assessment is based on their reflection on their learning experience and progress in the form of a diary submitted on a weekly basis. In Cycle 2, the students develop a personal project that is assessed by their fellow team members and the team leaders. In Cycle 3, the students offer consulting services to an actual client. The evaluation is done by a panel of external professionals invited to assess the consulting process and its results.

All information about the Intent program is based on the authors’ experience, interviews, and additional documents, such as written records provided by students and the program syllabus.

The Data Set

Data were collected through interviews with all 19 students enrolled in the program in the first semester of 2021.

Table 1. Sample of interview questions

Question	Interviewee Type
Tell me about yourself and how you got involved with Intent.	Both
What is Intent to you?	Both
What led you to choose to participate in Intent?	Team member
What differences do you see between Intent and other courses?	Team member
How is this difference related to your learning?	Team member
Have you experienced any personal change since you joined Intent?	Team member
Was there any activity or proposal that particularly impacted you?	Team member
How do you see your team's progress over time?	Team member
How did you become a professor of Intent?	Team leader
How do you feel being a team leader/professor in Intent?	Team leader
What have you learned as a professor/team leader in Intent?	Team leader
What does Intent represent to you, professionally?	Team leader
What makes Intent different from other initiatives or courses?	Team leader

None of the authors participated in the data collection, which was carried out by a research assistant who was fully involved in the first cycle.

The interviews took place at the end of the program's first cycle, five weeks and 120 class hours into the program. This moment was considered the most favorable for data collection because the first cycle focuses on topics related to the development of self-awareness, group relationships, and social skills. By design, it is therefore a period of intense self-examination and reflection, likely to yield rich results in an interview context. Table 1 presents a sample of the questions asked of team members and team leaders.

The script was semi-structured and allowed the participants to explore topics not necessarily in the script so that new insights could emerge unprompted.

The participants provided their consent to participate in the research through a consent form, and all information that could identify them was omitted. The research participants were assigned fictitious names. Of the 19 students, five were male and 14 were female. Each interview was approximately sixty minutes in length. They were all recorded and transcribed. The student cohort comprises individuals enrolled in either the Business and Management undergraduate program (17) or the Public Administration program (2). They are similar in age – having generally commenced their undergraduate studies directly after completing high school. Although demographic factors such as gender and socioeconomic background are recognized as

critical to identity work, these aspects are not the focus of the analysis and are therefore not examined in detail.

Role as Researcher

Both authors have participated in the Intent program in different roles and at different times. One of the authors was a team leader and co-creator of the program and held the role of team leader at the time of data collection. To minimize bias while still leveraging the trust established among participants, data collection was conducted by a research collaborator who had participated in the initial stage of the program (team formation). The authors were not directly involved in collecting the data, though they engaged with the primary data collector to refine the research instruments. The second author had participated in the program's first stage but in a different cohort. The limited involvement of the authors in data collection was intentional for two reasons: first, despite the program's reduced hierarchy, participants might still hesitate to share openly in the presence of the team leader; second, an outsider might face similar challenges due to a lack of trust. Thus, selecting a team member as the main interviewer allowed us to leverage the trust bond naturally formed during the program.

Data analysis was primarily conducted by the second author, who maintained some distance from the focal cohort and their specific experiences. Nonetheless, as a past participant of the program, their familiarity could both enrich the interpretation of meanings and introduce potential bias. To mitigate this, a third research assistant – also a former participant in a different Intent cohort – was invited to review the analysis. While this step aimed to reduce individual bias, it is acknowledged that it may not fully address the shared interpretive lens of Intent participants. At times, distancing from prior experiences during the analysis proved challenging. The process was approached through reflexivity, striving to balance leveraging insider perspectives with maintaining critical distance. As a final step, an independent scholar – unaffiliated with the research and the Intent program – was invited to review the analysis and discussion sections.

Data Analysis

Once all the data were collected, the analysis began by coding the text inductively. The inductive approach was used to understand what the informants stated about constructing their identities. This process resulted in theoretical constructs that are explored further (Charmaz, 2000). The data were coded using Atlas.TI software, whose tools facilitate the management of large volumes of data. During the coding process, the stories shared by the informants were compared, with attention to relevant facts that could contribute to achieving the research objectives.

Results and Discussion

The Identity Work Process

The college years, with the many transformations students usually undergo during this period, are fertile ground for identity work (Fernando & Kenny, 2021). The process described next is a zoom-in on a group of students who for the final part of their undergraduate course opted for an alternative curriculum and joined Intent.

It was observed that this process was set in motion by a dynamic of disidentification with and resistance to the prevalent identity fostered by the traditional educational program. Students, for instance, perceived a discrepancy between what they expected an administrator's work to be and what the course revealed. This often resulted in a feeling of dissatisfaction, prompting students either to drop out of the course (Fernando & Kenny, 2021) or to seek an alternative route that would offer new – both formal and informal – educational experiences. This alternative route then enabled the addition of new facets to their emergent identity. The context of the Intent program provided autonomy within a group learning experience and a safe pedagogical space, both of which were conducive to the identity work process.

Disidentification and Resistance. The students enrolled in Intent are in the final part of their undergraduate course. At that point, they have already had at least two and a half years of working on their self-identity as students in this business school. The empirical material showed that their search for an alternative program was motivated by both a genuine interest in the features of the program and the possibility of finding an escape route from unsatisfactory experiences in the regular course. It is argued that this disidentification process was a trigger for their search for alternative routes.

Unsatisfactory experiences were mapped in the empirical material. For one, the students reported a lack of freedom to make choices, to speak, and to present their ideas. They also spoke about feeling unsuited to the program with its traditional methods, which generated negative feelings and learning delays. Lastly, they did not feel safe exposing their vulnerabilities and were uncomfortable behaving naturally. In the following excerpt from the interview with Virgínia, some of these issues are evidenced:

When there was a sociology class, I wanted to say: professor, stop! Let's talk about what you're saying because I don't think I agree with that. And I never did. I think it was much more acceptable to raise your hand, ask a question, say a very particular thing, but never exchange ideas freely.

The excessive competitiveness between the students encouraged by the institution and the teachers' self-centered behavior also contributed to disidentification among the students. According to some of them, the competitiveness was encouraged by schemes such as honorable mentions awarded to the students with the highest grades. This meritocratic system based on grades provides or constrains the students' access to academic opportunities such as elective

courses and exchange programs. Additionally, students reported that some teachers were unwilling to share the role of primary protagonist. Instead of nurturing a safe environment, these teachers created an unhealthy psychological environment. This is supported by the words of Dandara, who said that some teachers could show "pleasure in torture" and demonstrate that they "are super powerful."

An organization's prevailing characteristics contribute to constructing the identity of the individuals who are part of it (Brown, 2022). In the case of business and management courses, attributes such as competitiveness, an entrepreneurial mindset (Bardon et al., 2021), pragmatism (Nicolini, 2003), and materialism (Bergman et al., 2010) are core features of the discourse and identity. Students who did not adjust to or identify with the prevalent identity initially responded emotionally. For instance, the research subjects reported feelings such as frustration, discouragement, disinterest, apathy, demotivation, anxiety, and guilt – emotions that can damage a person's mental health. These emotional reactions were understood as expressions of resistance.

Conceição summed up these negative feelings with the word disillusionment.

[...] you know when you just passed the entrance exam, and your eyes shine. I feel that [name of institution] took a lot of that away. I felt that this shine was fading over time. I did not find the classes interesting, and sometimes I was much more interested in sitting down and studying alone than in class [...] I always expected to be able to find my personality, for example in elective courses. Still, I never had good enough grades to be able to take the elective course I wanted. So this process of disillusionment also happened because of that.

Conceição mentions an expectation to find her personality during her academic years, which reinforces the role of education in students' identity work process. Since this was not achievable through the core curriculum, she pinned her hopes on elective courses, but this strategy was also frustrating because she did not have the grades required to enroll in the courses she wanted. Because the students did not identify with the traditional coursework, most members of the group examined resisted performing. As a result, they experienced negative emotional reactions and engaged in identity work to improve their subjective circumstances. In this context, resistance emerged as a relevant trigger to the identity work process (Barros, 2018; Danielsson et al., 2019; Frederiksen & Berglund, 2020).

Alternative routes. As stated by Barros (2018, p. 758), there are "disidentification costs" in, for instance, "openly criticizing and opposing a powerful [...] identity without a backup identification source." In the present research, these costs are identified as the students' attempts to manage disidentification and resistance. One possible route for the students is to drop out of the course. Only enrolled students were interviewed, so those who had dropped out were not reached. Nevertheless, the possibility had occurred to some of the interviewees. Given the investment already made in the course and the status associated with being a

university student, dropping out or engaging in vocal opposition were likely the costlier alternatives, both financially and psychologically. The interviewees preferred less disruptive options. Virginia referred to them as “escape routes”: “To be honest, my graduation has been made out of escape routes.” More accurately, these could be termed alternative routes.

This strategy consisted of performing as well as possible at the required minimum curriculum and being involved in other, subjectively more suitable, initiatives, such as sports (as a team member, a member of the athletic association, or a cheerleader); non-traditional elective disciplines, student associations of all sorts; or any other extracurricular activities (e.g., theater). Siivonen et al. (2020) demonstrated that in student-led initiatives a cohesive group identity based on a shared narrative leads to engagement through a sense of commitment. This is illustrated by Paulo’s description of the Junior Economics Consultancy, a student-led association that became his reason for staying in the course:

I found myself thinking that I wanted to stop studying at [institution’s name], but what motivated me [to stay] was the association. I was part of the Junior Economics Consultancy. I loved what I did there. Apart from my friends, it was my reason for continuing at [institution’s name]. There I saw a purpose for what I was doing.

Becoming part of the Intent program also constituted an alternative route. Students describe their motivation for joining the program as: “a semester doing just what I wanted” (Virginia), “a breath of fresh air” (Zumbi), “an opportunity to find something that has meaning” (Paulo), “a way to have new learning experiences” (Dandara); “a breath” (Lucinda); “a space to explore creativity” (Antonieta).

Another factor that emerged from the empirical material was the validation of friends who had already been part of the program, which reinforces the social component of identity. Intent participants have developed a particular identity for themselves and the program over the years of its existence. Marielle says, “Those in Intent have a different sensitivity to certain aspects, attitudes, topics, life issues and existence itself.” According to the interviewees, Intent offers elements such as friendship, self-knowledge, a safe space, creativity, and autonomy, which signposts it as an alternative route that has already been validated. Siivonen and collaborators (2020) found similar effects in groups of students in entrepreneurship societies, in which the construction of a collective identity and a sense of commitment helped students reduce the effects of pressures they were experiencing.

Reidentification. Being part of a program like Intent seems to be a way out of the disidentification-resistance dynamic, as it allows students to reidentify with their course and the institution. Reidentification process is understood here as a step that leads to the emergence of new facets of identity. Fueled by the disidentification-resistance dynamic, students searched deeply for opportunities that were closer to their expectations and desires in the business school environment. That these opportu-

nities were eventually found within the very context they resisted provided an opportunity for reidentification. The fact that Intent, although an alternative program, is officially recognized and accredited within the undergraduate course means that the institution simultaneously encompasses elements that might trigger resistance and an alternative route that allows the students to continue with their course. This allows them to expand and transform their identity through the identity work process. Autonomy, a psychological safe space, group work, and soft skills development – among them self-knowledge and self-development – are identified as enablers of reidentification. Although students reported that these attributes barely figured in other courses offered in the undergrad program, they were aware that Intent is part of the regular options the institution offers. Paulo’s perception illustrates this:

Intent [...] is something the [institutions’ name] offers [...], so I think it is nice that it does that. I also think it is related to what each of us looks for within the school: if you are open to new experiences or if you want to have a traditional lecture. I sought a non-traditional approach.

The self-development process Intent sets in motion appears to run deep and even be permeated by a high dose of discomfort. Antonieta’s experience shows the importance of putting aside established defenses when one is immersed in the process of identity work:

I arrived at Intent very organized, you know? I already had an idea of what I was going to do. For instance, I knew what I would do for the personal project. I knew my strong suits and how I would explore my leadership skills. It was all very cut and dried. And then, when I arrived, this process of the first cycle started to happen, and the dynamics started to happen. We were introduced to these group formation content and the facilitation tools. We were having those conversations, telling stories, then everything I had organized started to get disorganized. So I said: I don’t know what’s happening anymore. And then I started to question myself a lot [...]. And then, after organizing this mess, I started to see it more clearly. Some things are hidden, they are in a dark room; we have dark corners. Through the meetings, the discussions, and the discoveries, we get to know these dark corners, as we can shed some light on them.

Antonieta’s statement seems to sum up the process of reidentification that occurred over the course of the Intent program, which took her from a fixed identity to an intense process of identity work that entailed experimenting until she found a preferred identity (Brown et al., 2021; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Tracy and Trethewey (2005, p. 188) “emphasize the importance of individuals constructing different angles of repose and inching closer to the edges in their lives” and “place themselves in various situations with myriad textures” in aid of the construction of a richer self. This seems to be both the aim and the effect of the educational activities the investigated students embarked on.

The emergence of new facets of identity. As the students reidentify with their educational path through the Intent

program, new facets of identity emerge (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Oracy said:

One thing I feel is that I have more courage to be myself. [...] Intent showed me that I can be myself and be welcomed into the group. I can propose new ideas. I can do projects that I want to do. I can't tell you what has changed in my habits, personality, and way of being. But I feel that I have in general been more myself. I have been giving more authenticity to what I feel, think, and do.

Based on the concept of crystallization (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), it is understood that when this student felt more like himself, he was adding a facet to his personality that allowed him to feel more authentic (Brown et al., 2021; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Nonetheless he still retains aspects of his earlier identity from before his engagement with the program. The new facets were added in response to the new educational experiences he was exposed to in the alternative program.

Concretely, the empirical material revealed that participation in Intent contributed to the students developing new behaviors. For instance, Ciata and Lucinda addressed their interpersonal relationships. While Ciata became “a much more reflective person,” open to acting on her reflections, Lucinda reported having learned to “deal with others in a lighter way.” Dandara and Akotirene expanded their communication skills, primarily those related to self-positioning. Dandara emphasized that she was positioning herself better. Akotirene said that she had become much more confident in sharing her ideas “[...] even if I'm not really sure about the ideas, because I think I also understand that I can make mistakes, because I'm learning.”

In participating in the program, students had the opportunity to add new facets to their identity crystal, or, in the words of Antonieta, “take off all these adornments that I brought with me and try on other accessories, try on other clothes, try on other shoes, other combinations.” This illustrates how the students become open to exploring different facets of their identity or discovering new ones because they have found a space where they feel it is safe to do so (Edmondson, 2012; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

The findings highlight identification as a multi-level phenomenon. At the individual level, students engage in identity work by revisiting their personal values, emotions, and aspirations. At the group level, their sense of self is shaped through relational dynamics, shared goals, and mutual feedback. At the institutional level, the opportunity for reidentification emerges when students find meaning within spaces such as Intent. At the discursive level, students respond to dominant narratives of success, competition, and performance in business education, either by reproducing, resisting, or reconfiguring them.

Mechanisms that facilitate identity work

Analyzing the students' reports, features of the program that facilitate the identity work process were identified. These features are derived from the theoretical foundation of the person-centered approach. Organizing and interpret-

ing the empirical data allowed us to relate these features to three mechanisms that facilitate identity work.

Autonomy derived from the self-actualization tendency.

Based on the belief that students can direct their trajectories towards what they understand to be greater independence and a socially recognized maturity, the team leaders are responsible for designing and sustaining a learning space that is based on the group's shared experience without micromanaging the academic activities. The team members are encouraged to develop their individual or group projects independently. There are no lectures, and the students are free to engage with the course reading list at any point in the program. Although important, the reading is not checked.

Carolina was amazed by the interest the team leaders showed in her opinion about the program, as this had not been her experience in the traditional classroom. She says: “Wait. Is someone really asking me something? [People] want to know what I'm thinking [...]?” Penha emphasizes something similar when she describes having to conduct an activity for the whole class and the challenges of being a facilitator:

I think it's cool that we have this space [...] for us to conduct a workshop, for example. A traditional course never offered this space [...]. And out of nowhere, you see yourself as a facilitator, you see yourself creating activities, it's very different. It brings you a new sensation, and you wonder whether the participants will like it. Whether they will participate. Is [the activity] silly? Is [the activity] not adding anything?

Marta emphasizes the experience of autonomy and the freedom to learn, which, according to her, is essential and rare in traditional educational programs. She says:

I know that in Intent, I can experiment with my way of learning, [...] not only in my own way but in many ways, and see which one I like best. [...] There isn't just one way to learn. [...] At Intent, we are the protagonists of our history, of what we do. The people who propose the activities, who know what we want to learn, [...] [we have] this freedom to understand what motivates us.

The autonomy offered by the program provided the students the opportunity to develop interpersonal skills, among which they highlighted self-knowledge and self-development as the main ones. Working on knowing yourself is part of the definition of identity work (Brown, 2022), and achieving this is one of the main accomplishments of the program reported by the interviewees. Through projects, group dynamics, and educational experiences, students reported having achieved greater reflection, self and professional improvement, and having practiced giving and receiving feedback, in addition to having experienced themselves in different roles.

Assuming different roles that require taking on more responsibility reflects personal preferences, capabilities, and goals. The autonomy the students are given enables them to take responsibility for their choices. This process invites self-reflection and possibly even the deconstruction of an

already established identity and thus fosters and supports identity work.

A psychological safe space derived from unconditional positive regard. A space is psychologically safe when it offers a climate in which “people feel free to express relevant thoughts and feelings” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 118). It is not necessarily marked by harmony and friendship but by the freedom to express oneself genuinely and intentionally, without judgment. The psychologically safe space is the field where unconditional positive regard can occur. It is not decreed but built, and over the course of the Intent program, it is built through dynamics, activities, and discussions about group values, commitment, compromise, and empathy. These activities generate norms and agreements that the group maintains and revises whenever necessary.

One example of this is “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” an expression that refers to the non-disclosure agreement that aims to protect people who share personal information in the group. This kind of agreement is important for building a safe space that permits learning and training in communication tools such as deliberate feedback and non-violent communication. Finally, the team leaders also aim to model unconditional positive regard and intentional communication.

Conceição describes how she experienced the process of creating a safe space:

I think the process was a mutual learning process [...] everyone started slowly, then sometimes we took a step forward and two steps back, you know? [...] But as we learned, adapted [...], adapting to the environment, it seems that the group amalgamated. And we started creating bonds that are difficult to explain. How this was possible in a month [is also hard to explain], but we did it.

A safe pedagogical space allows the students to explore and develop their identity without the need to mobilize defense mechanisms against perceived threats, such as competitiveness, that exist in the traditional educational model. They reported that they felt free to expose personal traits and vulnerabilities, to express themselves, or to remain silent and reflective. Their way of studying was also affected: they reported feeling more confident and freer to participate actively in their education, making choices about the curriculum, facilitating workshops, and pursuing personal projects.

Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010, p. 46) propose that social defenses are a constituent element of identity workspaces that allow members of an organization to preserve their self-image in the face of internal or external threats or the anxiety generated by a task. In the context studied, it was in fact the elimination of social and personal defense mechanisms through the psychologically safe space that promoted identity work. This happened because the students were not seeking to protect their identity from threats; instead, they experienced a psychologically safe space that allowed them to try out new things without fear of repercussion.

In accordance with Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010), the study also observed that the promotion of identity work,

a holding or psychologically safe space is necessary. Marta emphasizes the importance of confidence and how it affects her performance: “I think if you’re confident about something, you can perform much better. If you’re insecure, you’re going to back off, and I think maybe the traditional [educational] environment brings with it a certain insecurity”.

This safe space is intentionally created and maintained by the team leader. However, it is built on the active participation of the group. This is possible because Intent follows a group-oriented educational model in which the whole class, including the team leader, works as a team. This feature furthers the feeling of belonging reported by the students, which in turn contributes to identity work. A statement made by Oracy reinforces this point:

I think that’s one of the first things that change [when you participate in Intent], is that you don’t do things out of obligation. You do things because you feel part of it, which, for me at least, is very important – to be part of something. To not feel inferior but part of the whole. My opinion will be valued. What I point out is important. It’s not a question I will ask in a regular class. Sometimes, it’s just a feeling that I can share.

Having an educational experience and feeling part of a safe group seems conducive to the identity work process. Fernando and Kenny (2021, p. 149) reached a similar conclusion by looking at a different scenario. Investigating the identity work of students from underrepresented groups at elite universities, the authors highlighted how all institutional material on diversity produced by these universities was “useful discursive material for backgrounding the significance they placed on their WP [widening participation] status and mitigating the lack of fit that they experienced.” Envisioning official spaces in which the students feel safe and represented – as in the Intent program – provides resources for sense-making and helps “individuals find like-minded others whom they can report to and rely on for support and encouragement” (Fernando & Kenny, 2021, p. 149).

A group approach derived from congruence. In a complex open system, any changes made in one part of the system will have a ripple effect on the whole. The team leader, although taking note of the characteristics, interests, and needs of each team member individually, prioritizes the characteristics, interests, and needs of the group as a whole (Kamkhagi, 1986), since the program has a collaborative and participatory approach to learning. The group is the dynamic entity through which values are experienced and incorporated, which, in turn, allows the practice of congruence, the emergence of tensions, and encounters with situations that require mediation and decision-making for the benefit of the community.

Congruence prevents the learning process focusing solely on individual development as fostered by the self-actualization tendency and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951/2003). For example, a student may not dedicate him- or herself to a task as much as other team members do if he/she believes this is the best decision for them. While this person can feel safe expressing their decision

to team members, knowing they will continue to belong to the group and be appreciated as having intrinsic value, the group may also act in congruence with its collective values and question the person's lack of participation in a collective task that needs to be accomplished. In the tension between individual and collective interests, possible compromises are negotiated on both sides.

In order to exercise congruence, it is necessary to overcome group thinking, that is, the reluctance to "disturb the feeling of harmony created by the group" (Edmondson, 2012, p. 119). This fear was expressed by Gilberto, who says that he would think a little before saying something that goes against the flow of the group. "Sometimes I don't speak out of fear of disturbing," he says, adding: "Then I try to change my point of view, to understand, and really listen to people." Dandara believes this fear is natural when building a team and dissipates over time. For her, "[i]t is not easy. At first, it is quite intimidating, but I think that as time passes, as people become closer and expose their opinions, the process becomes easier".

An episode involving Sueli illustrates how her expression of congruence impacted the entire group, which tended to choose large and renowned companies for the consulting project. Sueli felt increasingly uncomfortable with this approach and finally decided to express a contrary opinion, arguing that a small company could benefit much more from a consultancy. Her speech contradicted the group's prevailing view and provided a moment of reflection that generated change in the group. Despite her initial hesitation, Sueli felt welcome and validated after expressing her opinion and had "more courage" from that moment on.

After systematically gathering evidence and feedback from the group about her behavior, Marielle found herself in situations where her personal perception was inconsistent with the group's values.

My way of being a student is getting in my own way in Intent. The pattern repeats itself: I'm late, I'm forgetful, I don't attend some meeting, and I feel terrible. However, that's where the difference lies. I feel bad for not participating. I hold myself accountable for having forgotten. I am ashamed of what people might think of me because we have built a positive, close, and intense relationship.

She describes how her experience as a member of Intent was at odds with her performance expectations for herself, which invited her to rediscover herself to live up to her new expectations.

Developing an individual identity is closely linked to interpersonal contact within a group. As Huber and Knights (2022, p. 305) state, "Individuals are already social in advance of their identity work". In a social setting, people may be able to develop and express themselves in ways that reflect their values, beliefs, and personal experiences. The feedback from those interactions enables people to learn more about themselves and offers insight into strengths and weaknesses, acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and personality traits.

Hubers and Knights (2022, p. 304) state that identity, in that it reproduces and solidifies the self, may obstruct both learning and the ability to think differently. Putting a previously constructed identity to the test through group interaction under the conditions described here can be a challenging experience, since a group is a "social microcosm" (Hod & Ben-Zvi, 2018, p. 596) in which people's interactions can show them "what feelings their behavior evokes in others" and produce personal change and growth.

In the literature, there are critiques of the model of personality and learning proposed by Rogers (Brockett, 1985; Brookfield, 1984; Geller, 1982; Kirschner et al., 2006; Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2019). Servant-Miklos & Noordegraaf-Eelens (2019), for instance, critique the premises of self-directed learning as developed based on Roger's ideas as being individualistic and failing to live up to their emancipatory promise. On intent the principle of group primacy, combined with the concept of congruence, appears to play a key role in addressing this critique. To respond to the demands of an academic program situated within an institution committed to accountability, academic standards, and the mission of cultivating leaders for positive social transformation, the actualizing tendency and the principle of unconditional positive regard could, if applied in isolation, risk fostering individualism or even self-centered behavior (e.g., "I don't want to study because I'm tired"). By grounding the learning experience in the primacy of the group, however, the program ensures alignment with the institution's norms and objectives. In this setting, students retain the freedom to make personal choices, but such decisions are made in full awareness of their impact on the collective (e.g., "If I choose not to study because I'm tired, I'm aware that this decision carries consequences for both myself and the group").

Limitation and future studies.

This study has certain limitations, particularly regarding its generalizability. As a single-case study focused on a specific program and context, the findings may not be representative of all business education environments. Future research could build on this work by adopting comparative designs that explore how identity work unfolds across different programs, institutions, or pedagogical approaches. Such comparisons would offer valuable insights into which features of educational design most effectively support students' identity development, and under what conditions.

Additionally, while the data capture rich insights from the first five weeks of the program, the research is not longitudinal. Future studies could adopt extended designs that follow students throughout their entire undergraduate journey to better understand how identity work evolves over time. A longitudinal approach could help identify how key mechanisms shift, deepen, or fade as students move through different academic stages and life transitions.

Finally, future research investigating how the identities students form during university are reshaped as they transition into the job market and broader society is encouraged. Examining how graduates navigate professional environments with the values and identities shaped during

their education could illuminate the lasting impact of educational experiences and the long-term relevance of identity work in business education.

Implication for business and management education.

The study, particularly the three mechanisms identified – autonomy, psychological safety, and congruence – offers valuable implications for business schools seeking to support students' identity development. As business education continues to attract diverse student populations, understanding how pedagogical environments can either constrain or expand identity work becomes increasingly relevant. Each mechanism points to specific ways in which business schools can create more inclusive, empowering, and socially grounded learning environments.

First, fostering autonomy through self-actualization implies that business schools should provide students with opportunities to shape their learning journeys. This includes designing curricula that allow for greater flexibility, encouraging purpose-driven projects, and reducing overemphasis on rigid assessments or standardized learning paths. By enabling students to pursue topics aligned with their values and social concerns, schools can enhance intrinsic motivation and help students construct identities that integrate, rather than suppress, personal aspirations.

Second, promoting psychological safety through unconditional positive regard suggests that business schools must create spaces where students feel seen, heard, and respected. This involves embedding practices that support emotional expression, active listening, and value-based dialogue. Instructors and peers play a critical role in modeling empathy and non-judgment. When students feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage with challenging content, express dissenting views, and explore identities that may not conform to dominant business ideals.

Third, enabling congruence through a group-centered approach highlights the importance of cultivating strong, co-constructed communities within business education. Business schools can emphasize collective learning experiences, such as peer-led projects, team reflection sessions, and shared norm-setting. Rather than viewing students as individual competitors, this approach treats the cohort as a dynamic system where relational identity work unfolds. Encouraging collaboration over competition fosters a sense of belonging and accountability that supports long-term development.

Conclusion

This study aimed to describe and discuss the identity work process experienced by undergraduate students who resisted the hegemonic characteristics that mark the tradi-

tional business school environment and to propose mechanisms that facilitate identity work in the educational context. To this end, an alternative educational program called Integrated Education for Entrepreneurial Leadership, which applies the person-centered educational approach in the context of a Brazilian business school, was investigated.

As results, the paper presents and discusses an identity work process through constructs already used in the literature, such as resistance, disidentification, and crystallization (Barros, 2018; Danielsson et al., 2019; Frederiksen & Berglund, 2020; Smith, 2017; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), while introducing additional stages that have been little explored to date, such as the search for alternative routes and reidentification. This study contributes to the literature by examining how these stages serve as a bridge between the dynamics of disidentification, resistance, and the emergence of new identity facets in crystallization. The introduction of these additional stages helps to overcome dichotomous, dualistic, and fragmented views of identity that assume individuals undertake identity work to reach a presumed true self. A more nuanced picture is offered: even when students did not identify with certain aspects of their institution or the courses in which they were enrolled, it was possible to find an alternative route and to re-signify and re-accommodate the aspects that had caused resistance.

Based on the study of a person-centered educational program, this paper empirically expands on Petriglieri and Petriglieri's (2010) work, reinforcing that business schools can function as identity workspaces. The main contribution lies in identifying three mechanisms that facilitate identity work: autonomy, the psychologically safe space, and the group. The study also demonstrates that business schools have the potential to enable identity transformation rather than merely foster its protection. The literature notes that, although identity work can occur within tension (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), individuals also seek spaces that support them in the "cognitive, emotional, and social process of elaborating, experimenting with, and consolidating the meanings associated with the self" (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 46). Classroom practices based on the fundamentals of the person-centered approach promoted a secure environment based on unconditional positive regard (manifested as a psychologically safe space), and tension based on congruence (manifested through the group). Both were strengthened by the empowerment of the students, based on the self-actualization tendency and manifested in autonomy. This scenario was ideal for identity work, as it permitted consolidation and identity transformation.

Submitted: December 04, 2024 EST. Accepted: September 03, 2025 EST. Published: December 31, 2025 EST.



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