What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

"Shirley and Hargreaves have written the right book at the right time. They bring the voice of reason to the current heated 'culture wars' and battles over 'identity politics.' If we heed their wise counsel, we can learn to listen to one another and forge a collective identity of respect."

–Diane Ravitch
Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education
and President of the Public Education Network

"This essential book shows how all educators can and should address issues of identity in their schools with candor and civility. Carefully researched, it offers a clear conceptual framework and practical guidelines that can be followed in all schools everywhere."

–Patrick Tutwiler
Secretary of Education, Massachusetts

"Shirley and Hargreaves call for universal inclusive education that promotes dignity, generosity, and self-determined learning. They advocate for education that truly values and understands every individual, noting that what is essential for some children is good for all of them."

–Dame Alison Peacock
CEO, Chartered College of Teaching
London, England

"This is an excellent book and one that I will purchase for all our central leaders and school principals. It moves from academic theory to a real-life practical guide with stories that humanize our students, school staff, and communities."

–Tom D'Amico
Director of Education,
Ottawa Catholic School Board
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

"We find ourselves in a time where being inclusive and welcoming to all students is a political issue as opposed to a human one. Shirley and Hargreaves engage readers with their collective brilliance and heart to offer clarity in thought and action to ensure that students thrive, regardless of how they identify."

–Peter DeWitt
Author, Leadership Coach, Independent Consultant
Albany, New York

"This book will help us figure out how to name, interrupt, and educate when students experience anything that does not help them feel safe, included, respected, and cared for. It gives educators practical tools with which to lean into the difference between intent and impact."

–John Malloy
Superintendent, San Ramon Valley Unified
School District
Danville, California

"This is a work of courage and truth in the midst of a world that can be challenging. The content of the book fills my heart."

–Nicola Ngarewa
School Principal and Former Chair of the Teaching
Council of Aotearoa
Wellington, New Zealand

"Incisive, insightful, and inspirational. Shirley and Hargreaves present a compelling argument for schools and educators to work with students on the issues of identity. Moreover, they present practical and evidence-based guidelines that can be implemented in schools."

–Yong Zhao
Distinguished Professor of Education,
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas

"Every child needs to feel that they belong in order to feel safe enough to learn. *The Age of Identity* is an inspiring antidote to school systems that measure children with standardized tests. This compelling book is an overdue dose of radical common sense."

–Jim Knight
Member of the UK House of Lords and Former UK Schools Minister

"This brilliant and profound book is at the heart of education across the globe. Shirley and Hargreaves show how learning triumphs over ignorance when students are confident in who they are. They provide teachers with tools to navigate confidently one of the most controversial topics in education today. *The Age of Identity* is essential reading for all teachers."

–David Edwards
Secretary General, Education International
Brussels, Belgium

The Age of Identity

Who Do Our Kids Think They Are . . . and How Do We Help Them Belong?

Dennis Shirley

Andy Hargreaves

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Contents

Who This Book Is For

This book is written for the vast majority of educators, families, school board members, and everyone else invested in education. It speaks to everyone who wants their children—and, if they think about it for a moment, other people's children—to succeed, be well, and belong. It appeals to all of those who sometimes feel that they themselves are treated unjustly, unfairly, and unkindly, as they try to do what's best for kids.

It's a book that strives to get past the culture wars and the more volatile aspects of identity politics that divide communities into villains and victims, or aggressors and aggrieved. It moves beyond treating each other as singular, oversimplified, and often stigmatized identities. It rejects the ways in which people feel they are portrayed, and sometimes pilloried as one-dimensional beings, defined by or demonized solely because of their race, disability, privilege, or gender identity.

[This is a book that] rejects the ways in which people feel they are portrayed, and sometimes pilloried as one-dimensional beings, defined by or demonized solely because of their race, disability, privilege, or gender identity.

Our book urges readers to honestly confront exclusion and oppression wherever it exists within and beyond our schools. Yet, it also moves beyond discussing what to do about these injustices in languages of accusation, indignation, guilt, and shame.

Identity issues affect all of us and are the responsibility of all educators. What kinds of people children are and need to be now and in the future is at the heart of child development, of moving through adolescence, and of entering the adult world. Identity issues and even identity politics aren't just about particular groups, or other people, of one kind or another. They concern all of us.

Identities are also multiple and complex. All of us are many things, not just one. We may see ourselves and each other in terms of our race and ethnicity, our gender identity, our nationhood, or our stage of life. Other, less discussed aspects of identity may include our line of work; being a twin, a mother, or a grandfather; being a cancer survivor; or having a passion for marathon running, cooking, or musical performance.

To treat and categorize people in relation to just one aspect of their identity, however important, even where we mean well, is an insult to their dignity as full human beings. It turns people into boxes to be ticked or adversaries to be defeated. We must strive to understand our kids as whole beings, in all their complexity, with many changing facets to who they are and what they might become. Appearances, especially first appearances, can be deceptive. What we see isn't always what we get.

We want this book to inspire readers to address not just what should be attacked, opposed, canceled, or removed, but also, and mostly, what can be done together. We envision a time when dynamic communities of rich diversity will create success, fulfillment, inclusion, and belonging for everyone. In this quest, it's important to appreciate we are all imperfect and make mistakes from time to time. None of us has all the knowledge and all the answers. Humility is a necessary milestone on the road to humanity.

When we get down to it, in practical everyday language, we will appreciate that what is essential for some groups of our kids will usually benefit all of them—safer schools, a richer and more engaging curriculum, and more diverse pools of skills and talent. We will all get to know each other better and will accomplish more together. We will find ways to discuss disagreements and differences in a spirit of goodwill and with a mindset of civility that respects and protects one another's dignity.

This is what most people want. Those very few who believe they have nothing to learn from their opponents, and who engage in culture wars and identity politics to advance their self-interests, or to distract their rivals, are not the people for whom this book is written. For everyone else, let's begin.

Preface

Education and Human Development

This is a book about one of the most abiding aspects of education and one of the most compelling and controversial issues of our times: identity.

Since schools were first founded, from the ancient Greeks onward, education has been about more than accumulating knowledge and skills.[1] It has addressed how to develop people and help them form their character, and how to shape whole societies and civilizations. From its Latin origin, *educere*, education is not about drumming ideas into people. It is about leading people and their ideas out.

Who are we? What will become of us? What can we be part of? How will that make the world a better place?

The Catholic, Jesuit tradition, in institutions like our own Boston College, is dedicated to education as a process of human formation.[2] The German and Northern European philosophy of *Bildung* imbues public education with a spirit of self-cultivation and unifies identity and the self with the broader society.[3] Culturally responsive teaching addresses how the content of the curriculum should enable students from diverse backgrounds to feel like they are included, engaged, and belong in their school environment.[4]

In virtually every country, education contributes to nation building by cultivating belonging among young people, through developing their sense of collective identity. The International Baccalaureate and the British Commonwealth's Duke of Edinburgh's Award program both include service to the community as a significant part of their curriculum. With threats to democracy, to voting rights, and to the privacy of voter information, educational systems in many nations are also rediscovering the importance of making democracy a central part of young people's experiences in school.

Who are we? What will become of us? What can we be part of? How will that make the world a better place? These questions are fundamental to how people experience education. In the words of the classic French

sociologist and former teacher Émile Durkheim, education shapes the generations of the future. Many teachers today still recognize the truth in the old dictum that they don't teach subjects, they teach children. Parents want their kids to succeed. But they want them to be happy and fulfilled too.

By design or default, identity is always integral to education. We can't avoid it, even if we try. In the four decades spanning the turn of this century, though, it looked like the world was making every effort to subordinate identity and human development to the global drive for increased economic performance and educational achievement. Identity issues were overlooked and ignored. They were rendered invisible.

From Achievement to Identity

From the 1980s onward, more and more schools and school systems were thrown into what we have called an *Age of Achievement and Effort*.[5] Educational policies reflected priorities to bring about more and more economic growth, as measured by gross domestic product, rather than focusing on sustainability and quality-of-life factors such as happiness, meaning, purpose, inclusion, and sense of belonging. Performance measures in education mimicked performance targets in economies. Education policies were defined by efforts to drive up standards, narrow achievement gaps, outperform competitors, race to the top, benchmark against the best, spend more time and effort on formal learning, deliver measurable outcomes, and improve results.

At first, some of these measures gave needed direction to school systems. Before long, however, they took on an unstoppable logic all their own. Many important aspects of human development were sacrificed to the lemming-like rush toward the cliff's edge of never-ending achievement gains. Preparation for competitive tests and examinations left little or no time for arts, social studies, physical education, or learning outdoors. A vast industry of cram schools and grind schools grew up, along with other private tutoring services after school. Homework increased. Student engagement suffered. Anxiety and other kinds of ill-being began to affect young people's mental health. In the *Age of Achievement and Effort*, identity issues were officially irrelevant.

Things started to change from about 2010, though. A new age emerged of *Engagement, Well-Being, and Identity*. Our book is one of three we have written on each of the three parts of this age.[6] This one is concerned with the *Age of Identity.*

From 2009 up to 2018, we undertook two long spells of working with a representative sample of 10 of Ontario's 72 school districts in a consortium to analyze and advance the agenda for inclusion that they had been asked to move forward by the province's Ministry of Education.

Inclusion was originally a more sophisticated way of thinking about how to support children with special educational needs. It was about shifting from an emphasis on legally and psychologically identifying individual children with exceptionalities and providing interventions and supports for them, to creating environments where collaborative teams of teachers used differentiated instruction with the assistance of technological supports that could enable all students to succeed.

From 2014, under a new premier, Kathleen Wynne, for whom Andy was an education adviser, the province, and, therefore, the 10 districts in our consortium, deepened the approach to inclusion, equity, and well-being. Excellence was defined broadly beyond literacy and mathematics to make the school "a compelling, innovative and engaging place to learn for all students." Equity was about "inclusivity and respect," "regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other factors." Well-being would promote "a positive sense of self and belonging" to develop the "whole child." *Achieving excellence* made inclusion and identity central to attaining equity and excellence.

Educators in our districts developed innovative projects to promote aspects of these new policy directions. Working with our diverse team of graduate students, we undertook case studies of each of these districts and held twice-yearly retreats with them in Toronto. It was the educators' interests, not ours, that took us into new terrain that addressed student learning and engagement, well-being, and identity.

In addition to an online technical report and several peer-reviewed research articles, listed at the back of this book, the products of our work are now spread across four books—*Five Paths of Student Engagement*, *Well-Being in Schools*, *Leadership From the Middle*, and this final volume: *The Age of Identity*.[7]

This is how we came to the topic of identity. We followed the interests of the educators in the 10 districts. We didn't decide to study and then write a book about identity. In many ways, the *Age of Identity* wrote us!

We have brought to this book the evidence of this research along with occasional references to other projects in which we have subsequently

been engaged, the intellectual traditions in which we have been trained, and our interpretations of key contemporary sources on identity. At times, we have included reflections on our own biographies and identities. We have used all this to contribute to the field of identity in education in a way that may vary from accounts by people who have researched the topic in a different way, at a different time, in a different place, or from a different standpoint.

We do not presume to offer a definitive work on identity, or to provide comprehensive coverage of any or all types of identity. But we hope other researchers, educators, and readers in general will find things of value here that will deepen and challenge their own thinking on identity in schools today and help us bring together our different perspectives to work for the good of all students.

The Identity Agenda

As this book goes to press, we find ourselves in an intriguing historical moment. On the one hand, identities are being oppressed and excluded everywhere simply because of where people were born, what they look like, and how people in power respond to that.

- Economic inequality and the poverty that results from it are at their highest levels since before World War II.[8] According to Oxfam International, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the richest 1% acquired almost twice the world's wealth as everyone else put together.[9]
- Despite the *Black Lives Matter* movement, violence against and victimization of Black and Brown people continue to be inflicted by law enforcement officers on minority communities in many countries.[10]
- A 2023 survey in England of students' feelings about their safety in school found that less than half of those with "a gender identity other than male or female" or of those who were gay or bisexual felt safe compared with approximately three quarters of heterosexual students.[11]
- In Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, children who find themselves to be refugees, for no other reason than the geography of their birth, are sent to live in

camps in conditions of squalor deliberately designed to deter other refugees.[12]

- In the United States, the only country that has refused to sign the 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, minors are imprisoned with adult felons.[13] More than a dozen U.S. states still shackle some pregnant women prisoners to their beds, in spite of protests by the American Medical Association.[14]
- In Canada, communities have been exhuming the remains of maltreated Indigenous children from residential schools that forcibly separated them from their language, families, and communities until as late as the mid-1990s.[15]
- The Russian war against Ukraine is attempting to erase national and cultural identity by, among even more cruel methods, forcing teachers in occupied territories to communicate in Russian and to remove Ukrainian cultural content from the curriculum.[16]
- Climate change, and the resistance of the traditional energy industry to combatting it, is posing the greatest and ultimate threat of all to the identities of the world's rising generations: extinction.[17]

On the other hand, in response to all this, groups who want to protect their privileges are twisting and turning aspects of these very real forms of social exclusion into full-scale culture wars. This is an *Alice in Wonderland* world of identity politics—of excessive focus on and moral panics about a tiny number of hot-button issues involving a few controversial textbooks and novels, statues and plaques, or bathrooms and pronouns.[18] The purpose of these fomented moral panics is to stoke up culture wars and inflame *identity politics* on a few symbolic issues to fill up the media bandwidth. This diverts people's anger and indignation away from massive economic and racial oppressions that have devastating consequences for monumental numbers of people with marginalized identities.

Groups who want to protect their privileges are twisting and turning aspects of these very real forms of social exclusion into full-scale culture wars.

The expression *identity politics* goes back to a group known as the Combahee River Collective.[19] The Collective was a Black, feminist, lesbian organization in the 1970s, which felt that much of the feminist movement was racist and that parts of the civil rights movement were sexist and homophobic. It was an early example of what is now known

as *intersectionality*. In a famous statement it made in 1977, the group introduced the term *identity politics* to help articulate its own feelings of oppression. Since then, like the term *woke* that has similar origins, *identity politics* has often been turned into a term of abuse by opponents of equity and inclusion.

This is a shame and an outrage. Identity politics are about the real differences that make many students prone to being marginalized and oppressed. They are a gateway into inclusion because they pinpoint who needs particular attention and why, as well as how the whole school culture needs to shift to make these accommodations possible. The point of identity politics should not be to put us into categories that set us against one another. It should be to include all of us, and bring us all together.

Historically, identity is a relatively recent phenomenon. In *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, Stanford University professor Francis Fukuyama argues that traditional societies had no need for any concept of identity or even of the self.[20] In agrarian societies, there were few differences other than biologically ascribed ones of age or gender.

> Social roles are both limited and fixed: a strict hierarchy is based on age and gender; everyone has the same occupation; one's entire life is in the same small village with a limited circle of friends and neighbors; one's religion and beliefs are shared by all; and social mobility is virtually impossible.[21]

There was no pluralism, movement, or choice—no need for anyone to distinguish themselves from anyone else. The world was what it was, and you were what you were. There wasn't much more to it.

With modernization, though, people took on new jobs, moved to cities, and met other kinds of people. Trade expanded, imperial colonization took place, mass migrations across continents and oceans occurred, and the printing press spread new ideas. Elites started to have leisure, time for reflection arose, travel and tourism evolved, women eventually took control of their own reproductive choices,

and other life opportunities arose for them. Ideas of dignity and democracy took root, and oppressed and marginalized groups started to rebel and assert their rights. Television and then the internet spread images of how to look and to be, and medical science made it possible to hide the signs of aging, treat physical disabilities, and eventually enable people to affirm their gender identities.

In a couple of hundred years, a great deal happened. Now new identities are asserted, defended, and transformed all the time. The *Age of Identity* is not about finding or revealing our identities. It's about creating them anew.

The sense of liberation that comes with near-limitless choices, however, is coupled with feelings of what British social theorist Anthony Giddens calls "radical doubt."[22] "Modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge," Giddens writes.[23] As a result, we find that we no longer have confidence or clarity about who we really are.

Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells is more metaphorical. When traditional authority has collapsed, he says, "The king and the queen, the state and civil society, are both naked, and their children-citizens are wandering around a variety of foster homes."[24] However, Castells also points to new social movements of those who have experienced discrimination and who struggle for inclusion—women, people of color, disabled groups, and the LGBTQ+ community among them. These groups form the backbone of contemporary *identity politics.*

IDENTITY IS . . .

A universal part of modern human and educational development.

An integral element of adolescence and growing up.

An essential aspect of equity and inclusion.

A process, a quest, and a struggle.

Formed through relationships with others.

Something to acknowledge, represent, and celebrate.

Something that must sometimes be critiqued and challenged.

Multiple, complicated, and intersecting.

Presented differently to different groups and audiences.

Sometimes fluid, but never boundless.

Inseparable from who has the power to define it.

Often attacked, stigmatized, and suppressed.

Sometimes invisible, overlooked, and ignored.

An expression of personal uniqueness.

A resource for collective belonging.

LOOKING AHEAD

In this book we look at how education is affected by and in turn actively forms our identities and senses of ourselves. Identity is who we are. Including and engaging with diverse identities is essential to equity and achievement. Throughout this book, we will touch on all 15 statements and ideas about identity listed on the previous page.

We are living in a time when identity is all the rage—literally as well as figuratively. Hopefully, our research, and its illuminating examples, will help educators, parents, policy makers, and school board members move beyond rage to reconciliation. In the final chapter, we provide principles, protocols, and strategies to help people engage with diverse identities while also creating an educational and social world where we can all learn to live together to advance the common good.

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The Age of Identity is the fifth book that Dennis and Andy have written together.

CHAPTER 1

To Be, Or Not to Be

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

—John Donne (1624)

The question of identity is not just about *them*, the others. Identity issues affect all of us.

Who Do We Think We Are?

Who do you think you are? It's a simple enough question. It should have an obvious answer. Increasingly, though, knowing and saying who we are is getting more and more complicated.

Which cultures should be celebrated?

Whose historical accomplishments should be honored?

What pronouns should we use for ourselves and others?

How do we talk about children with learning disabilities?

Are all of us neurodiverse?

What signs do we put on the bathroom door?

Which identities should be included in the curriculum, and which ones left out?

Who will decide?

And who do we think are the kids in our homes and our schools?

Do we truly know our kids?

How do we get past the impressions our kids present to us?

Identity has become one of the most controversial issues of our time. Potential school board members run for election with platforms that articulate provocative views about identity. School administrators get fired for saying the wrong thing in relation to identity. Statues are raised or removed because of it. The curriculum is constantly changing in response to it. The signs of the *Age of Identity* are everywhere. They are impossible to ignore. But it's often difficult to know what to do.

Identity issues affect all of us. It's hard to know *how* to be unless we know *who* we are. It's also difficult to know *who* we are unless we know *what* we are and are *not* a part of.

The question of identity is not just about *them*, the others—people who are different and who have been excluded or oppressed in one way or another. Identity issues affect all of us. It's hard to know *how* to be unless we know *who* we are. It's also difficult to know *who* we are unless we know *what* we are and are *not* a part of.

Human beings are not feral creatures. We do not grow up among wild beasts, or alone, all by ourselves. Maintaining a clear sense of who we are becomes very difficult if we get stranded on a desert island or are condemned to solitary confinement in prison. This is why isolation is a basic method of interrogation.

To feel alone, abandoned, and without any sense of belonging to anything is one of the worst conditions we can imagine. "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main," wrote the 17th century English poet John Donne.[1] Tom Hanks, in the movie *Cast Away*, needed his imaginary friend, Wilson, a volleyball, in order to survive.[2] This is why former U.K. prime minister Margaret Thatcher was factually as well as morally wrong when she declared, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families."[3]

Educators play an important role in helping students deal with identity issues. From the moment children start school, teachers are already helping them learn about their identities and how they can and should be developed.

Identity matters for everyone. Recall your first date and how anxious (and excited) you were about how you would come across to your new romantic interest. Did you suddenly feel differently about yourself when you became a parent or a grandparent for the first time? What if you moved to another country as an adult or a child? Did you worry whether people would accept you, what your accent was like, and if you would fit in? If you went to live away from home at university or college, did you suddenly feel different, more independent, and free?

Some changes in identity can be abrupt, unexpected, traumatic, or revelatory. They can make us question, redefine, or reembrace the very essence of who we or other people are.

Korean-born, U.S.-adopted identical twin sisters Emily Bushnell and Molly Sinert, competitors on CBS TV's *Amazing Race*, had only recently discovered each other. During their mid-30s, an at-home DNA test revealed to each twin the existence of the other twin. When they met for the first time, Bushnell said, "We talked a lot. We cried. We laughed. We got a chance to be sisters together."[4] Discovering in midlife that they had a twin and were a twin was transformative to their sense of identity.

Americans regularly celebrate Rosa Parks, whose refusal to go to the back of the bus with other Black Americans in Alabama sparked the civil rights movement in 1955. Yet most are unaware that Parks also attached significance to her identity as the descendant of her white great-grandfather, James Percival. He was an unfree, indentured immigrant laborer from Glasgow in the United Kingdom. Percival married Parks's "unmixed" mother in 1860, when she was still enslaved at a plantation outside of Montgomery, Alabama.[5]

Irene is one of nine intersex persons who were interviewed for *Teen Vogue* magazine in 2019. She was 22 when she discovered she was intersex after watching a video on the topic and then tracing her medical records. "Discovering the truth was the best thing that ever happened to me," she said. "I wish I knew the truth from the start. I could've avoided years of pain, shame, and self-hatred."[6] In the words of another interviewee, Danielle from Germany, "embracing my intersex identity gave me a truly worthy purpose that consistently grounds me and sets me in the right direction."[7] Interestingly, one of the seven items on the menu at TeenVogue.com, alongside others like style, politics, culture, and shopping, is identity.

Revelations like these are the essence of the U.K. celebrity genealogical TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* and its U.S. equivalent, *Finding Your Roots*. Singer-songwriter Carly Simon, for example, had always been told by her Cuban-born grandmother that she was descended from the king of Spain, but this turned out to be a cover story. DNA testing revealed that her grandmother was 40% Black. Simon's great-grandmother, it turned out, was 100% Black. As *Finding Your Roots* host Henry Louis Gates Jr. commented, "We have never tested a white person as Black as you."[8] Simon found this to be "completely fascinating."[9]

But these racial revelations don't always yield the same result. When confronted on Trisha Goddard's U.K. TV show with DNA evidence that he was 14% Sub-Saharan African, American white supremacist Paul Craig Cobb dismissed the evidence as "statistical noise."[10] This echoed the tendency of many other white supremacists faced with similar evidence to reject it as flawed science, to invoke conspiracy theories, or to recalculate what whiteness means. Identity shocks can open people up—or just make them deepen their denial.

Who Do They Think They Are?

When children or adults have crossed us or betrayed us, or let themselves down, asking them who on earth they think they are is a criticism and a challenge.

When a model student bullies a classmate, when a star sports performer rubs their victory in the face of their opponents, or if our own partner has an affair with someone else, we often hurl this outraged question at them: "Who *on earth* do *you* think you are?" Transgressions like these raise questions about whether the student, the sports star, or our partner has betrayed their own identity, or revealed themselves to be someone else altogether.

This happens when people we know, love, or respect fall from grace—when their immense accomplishments are negated by discoveries that they have gone to prison for swindling their associates, have been distributing child sex abuse material, have blurted out racial insults, or have sexually harassed a colleague. What became of them? Did they turn into someone else? Did we never really know them in the first place? Indeed, do we ever, fully, know anybody at all, including ourselves? People may not be all that they seem. Like a ship using a false flag to deceive its enemy, they may have been hiding their true colors all along.

Conversely, educators know all too well the phenomenon of young people being or becoming far more than they have always seemed. The struggling student who becomes a late bloomer, the shy classmate who turns into a star on stage, the dour plodder who becomes a creative genius once their teacher finds and ignites their passion—these kinds of transformations are what teachers live for. Sometimes, teachers and parents seem to know their children even better than the children know themselves!

Learning How Not to Be

Identity matters for all of us. Who we are, what we will become, and how we develop character, become citizens, experience belonging, and learn to be inclusive of others who are different from us—these purposes of education and schools are fundamental. They also have a long and distinguished pedigree.

In Greek philosophy, Aristotle said that education should lead toward habitual ways of thinking and acting that promote four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.[11] Friedrich Froebel, the inventor of the kindergarten, disagreed with the harsh discipline he saw in German education in the 19th century and created a gentler way of teaching that recognized the child's need for play, dance, art, and nature study.[12] Early childhood legend Maria Montessori took Froebel's ideas one step further and asked educators to refrain from the imposition of a preestablished curriculum in order to follow "the natural physiological and psychological development of the child."[13] She designed learning so that children could freely circulate among play centers to learn topics of their own choosing at their own pace. Likewise, American progressive educator John Dewey advised teachers that work should not be drudgery, nor should play be mere amusement, aimlessness, or relief from work. Rather, like botany and outdoor gardening, work and play should be integrated parts of young people's learning and development.[14]

For all these visionary educators, the growing child was a whole person requiring careful guidance in the development of their complete identities over years of maturation and growth.

But for several decades that spanned the turn of this century, identity issues dropped to the bottom of the list of many school systems' priorities. In some cases, the most zealous reformers struck them off the page completely. Still, the question of identity never went away entirely. It just went underground.

In the most famous soliloquy ever written, Shakespeare's Hamlet asks:

> *To be, or not to be: that is the question:*
> *Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer*
> *The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,*
> *Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,*
> *And by opposing end them.*[15]

Hamlet is pondering whether life, given all its "slings and arrows," is worth living at all. But "to be, or not to be," could also be about *how* we live, not just whether we live or die. Should we live fully and completely, or barely exist?

For 40 years, many of the world's educational systems, and the international metrics that compared their performances, operated as if they were teaching young people how and who *not* to be. Literacy, mathematics, and science crowded out disciplines like history, music, and the visual arts. Measurable results focused on achievement targets, testing, attendance, performance, high school completion, and graduation rates.

Educators found themselves driven by an agenda emphasizing student achievement and effort. They devoted little or no attention to engagement, well-being, or identity. Schooling was about what students did and how they performed, not who they were or what they might become.

An inspired but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to turn back this tide toward developing young people as human beings in their emotional, moral, and spiritual lives, rather than focusing only on their cognitive knowledge and skills, was attempted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization in 1996. At that time an "International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century" composed of representatives from 15 countries issued a report called *Learning: The Treasure Within.*[16] It proposed four pillars

for the future of education. Two of them were about *learning to know* and *learning to do.*

Learning to know defines the traditional goal to help students acquire "broad general education with the possibility of in-depth work on a selected number of subjects."[17]

Learning to do is to acquire "a competence that enables people to deal with a variety of situations" and teams in order to "try out and develop their abilities by becoming involved in work development schemes."[18]

The problem, the International Commission warned, was that the offerings of schools were too narrow. "Formal education focused mainly, if not exclusively, on *learning to know*, and to a lesser extent on *learning to do*."[19]

Nonetheless, in spite of these warnings, many of the world's education systems, especially the Anglo American group of nations, alongside transnational organizations such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, pressed on with driving up results in literacy, mathematics, and science. Usually this was at the expense of other areas of learning and development. Students' social and emotional learning and learning outdoors, in nature, were pushed to the margins. *Learning to know* eclipsed everything else.

During this period, student identity was irrelevant in most educational policies. The nearest thing to it was a demographic or legal category. Schools classified students by labels such as *African American*, *immigrant*, *English learner*, or *child with identified special needs*. This was perhaps well intended, but also often misleading and bemusing. Brazilian immigrants to the United States, for example, have no category that applies to them. And more and more people now, like Andy's five grandchildren, are mixed heritage and don't fit any single box at all.

Educators might celebrate Black History Month, Cinco de Mayo, or Lunar New Year, but in terms of official policies, these recognitions of cultural diversity have been peripheral to making achievement gains or improving high school graduation rates. The content of the curriculum

Icon source: Gatot supandri/istock.com

and how it did or didn't mesh with young people's cultures and identities was officially unimportant. Who students were and what they felt they were part of was tangential to the drive for higher performance and better delivery.

Learning to Live Together

So, as well as *learning to know* and *learning to do*, what else should our young people be learning? What were the missing pillars? They were existential and social. They were about *learning to be* and *learning to live together.*

Learning to be means giving every child and adolescent "every possible opportunity" to develop their personality and be able to act with ever greater "freedom of thought, judgment, feeling and imagination."[20] "None of the talents which are hidden like buried treasure in every person must be left untapped."[21]

Learning to live together involves creating "a spirit of tolerance and dialogue" among the young.[22] This must be done "so that the legitimate aspiration to preserve traditions and a collective identity is never seen as incompatible with a spirit of fellowship and solidarity, and so that the maintenance of social cohesion never implies a closer, inward-looking attitude or fundamentalism."[23]

The International Commission was named after its chair, Jacques Delors, the eighth president of the European Commission. Delors cared about peace, unity, and belonging. For him, *learning to live together* was the most important pillar of all. Alarmed by the inability of nations and the United Nations to stop international conflicts, his commission asked: Who should we become, so that we can live together? How should we promote the identities of all young people, so they can lead their lives with inclusion and a sense of belonging?

The message was crystal clear: It's no longer enough to know how to memorize content or make things. We must also, and perhaps especially, *learn to be* and *learn to live together*.

Icon Source: Gatot supandri/istock.com

Identity and Inclusion

Historically, a lot of the work on identity, particularly on adolescent identity, has focused on helping all young people to become their best selves when they are separating from their parents and forging their own personalities. This remains an essential part of the *Age of Identity*. In recent years, though, identity issues have become both more dominant and more disputed. Six reasons for this are set out in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Social Causes of the Rising Interest in Identity

 **Generational**	Generation X (born 1965–1980) is independent and calculative about work–life balance. Millennials (1981–1996) focus on developing their own personalities. In each case, the individual is at the center of how the generation understands itself.[24]
 **Technological**	Expanded adolescent use of smartphones since 2012 has led to a preoccupation with image enhancement and with virtual identities designed to maximize followers and friends.[25]
 **Psychological**	Mounting social problems have been met with a proliferation of psychological coping strategies that turn people inward with practical recommendations promoting wellness, meditation, life coaching, self-help, and self-care.[26]
 **Medical**	Advances in medical technologies mean that biologically given characteristics of age, gender, or appearance can be altered through cosmetic procedures and gender affirmation.[27]
 **Global**	War, climate change, and poverty drive people to migrate elsewhere. This increases awareness of and resentment about cultural differences. National identity is called into question.[28]
 **Cultural-Political**	Increasing and unsolved economic inequalities are kept off the public agenda, and politics has organized instead around other lightning rod social issues such as transgender identities, textbook content, pronoun usage, and white privilege.[29]

Source: Generational, Psychological, Global icons by iStock.com/appleuzr; Cultural Political icon by iStock.com/Yuriy Altukhov

In addition to and arising out of these multiple forces has been a significant push in educational institutions and workplaces toward inclusion of different cultures and identities as ways to increase equity and opportunity. These moves, in turn, have been met with an indignant backlash from groups who have felt threatened or overlooked by these developments. Increased *inclusion*, on the one hand, has come up against *righteous indignation*, on the other.

Increased *inclusion*, on the one hand, has come up against *righteous indignation*, on the other.

Inclusion affects us all. Can you think of a time when, in a nontrivial way, you were, or you felt, excluded for one reason or another? Perhaps teenage peers looked down on you because they thought you were too much into your books. Maybe you stood out because you had a different accent, were the only child with a different skin color, or came from the "wrong" side of town.

Were you ever bullied, teased, or picked on? What did it feel like if you were making your career as a young woman in a workplace dominated by older men? Suppose you were gay or lesbian in a place where coming out could end your career?

Maybe you are a single parent whose social invitations dried up when you were no longer part of a couple. How have you felt if your own child has been mocked because of a stutter or another speech disorder? If you have hit your 60s, do you feel offended when waitstaff direct you to the worst tables at the back of restaurants?

Hopefully, the example you recalled, although painful or embarrassing, was a transient one. But what if you were to experience, or indeed already do experience, these sorts of exclusions every day? How degrading and dispiriting that must be.

Over 50 years of policies and legislation have attempted to bring about greater equity by tackling forms of exclusion that hold whole groups of people back because of prejudice and discrimination that has nothing to do with their performance. Equal pay for women, prohibition of racial and ethnic discrimination, rights of access and inclusivity for people with disabilities, outlawing of sexual harassment, LGBTQ+ rights in the workplace, and the legalization of same-sex marriage have made the most egregious forms of exclusion illegal in many societies.

In schools, inclusion policies first emerged as synonyms for special education provisions so that young people with physical or mental disabilities would not be excluded from the learning experiences and opportunities that others are able to enjoy. Inclusion here often meant putting an end to separate classes and schools for students with special needs. Or it involved halting the practice of withdrawing students periodically from their regular classes for additional support.

Over time, inclusion in some educational systems moved closer to the more all-encompassing understanding of inclusion and diversity in workplaces. This has meant that more schools now try to ensure that all students and staff have equal opportunities, are respected, and feel they belong.

In September 2022, the United Nations convened a "Transforming Education Summit" in New York City that placed "commitment to addressing educational exclusion" as its top priority.[30] The UN identified several identity groups experiencing social exclusion as "girls and young women; learners with disabilities; Indigenous populations, cultural and linguistic minorities; rural learners; stateless people; internally displaced peoples; [and] refugees."[31] It warned that without developing new strategies to "ensure the inclusion of all in the education system," the world's countries would fail to meet its sustainable development goals—especially the goal of providing "quality education for all," regardless of one's background or ascribed identity.[32]

In addition to our collaborative work with educators in Ontario, Andy has codirected with Professor Jess Whitley a developmental evaluation of the implementation of the inclusion strategy of another Canadian province: Nova Scotia. Both systems have adopted an especially bold approach to inclusion. For example, Nova Scotia's Inclusive Education Policy states that

> inclusive education is a commitment to ensuring a high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student. All students should feel that they belong in an inclusive school—accepted, safe, and valued—so they can best learn and succeed.[33]

As in Ontario, the groups specifically served and supported by Nova Scotia's Inclusive Education Policy extend beyond those with identified special educational needs. Inclusion is the path to equity for all students. The strategy is especially meant to support "success for students who are historically marginalized and racialized (African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw students) or who come from other groups that have been traditionally under-represented and under-served, including, but not limited to, students with special needs and those struggling with poverty."[34] In these respects, inclusion and identity are intertwined.

Identity and Indignation

The *Age of Identity* has emerged and advanced out of these kinds of movements for equity and inclusion. But they have not gone unopposed. Struggles over identity and recognition now span a spectrum

from broad arguments about the importance of inclusion with which almost everyone might agree, to disputes about the relative worth of different identities that some groups want to cherish, and others say should be canceled. Sometimes, in these back-and-forth debates between race and social class, between religious freedom and human rights, and about what the proper definition of a woman is, it can feel impossible to find common ground.

Twenty-five U.S. states have passed legislation prescribing and proscribing how and whether teachers should address issues of race and gender identity.[35] *The Washington Post* reports that 64 bills are being enforced that curtail teachers' freedom to discuss these topics.[36] In the most severe instances, parents can lodge complaints against teachers and school librarians online that can result in disciplinary measures and terminated employment.[37]

In England, the government insists that children should learn an airbrushed version of history that downplays the negative aspects of an empire that once covered a quarter of the globe.[38] After the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia burned textbooks and passed new laws to inscribe Russian identity in the curriculum, while Ukraine reciprocated by removing many elements of Russian language and literature from its curriculum.[39] In May 2022, a wave of protests broke out in India after a new curriculum promoted Hindu nationalism and omitted the contributions of the country's minority Muslim population.[40]

Canada too is witnessing rising indignation about identity issues in schools. Ontario's Waterloo school district, with a long-standing German and Mennonite heritage, has seen recent settlement from Arabic and Punjabi speakers.[41] The district's Muslim director also claims Indigenous Polynesian ancestry. Heated discussions in school board meetings have included concerns about two books that discuss asexuality and transgender identities, and about the director's advice to parents to avoid Halloween costume day, decorations, and treats in school. Threats to the director and school board members were traced to local phone numbers but also to area codes as far away as Texas.

Not all disputes and debates about identity issues can be indisputably categorized as good and bad or right and wrong. Consider these questions concerning gender (see boxed text).

QUESTIONS ON GENDER

- How often should educators make sure that girls (and boys) study topics and read about protagonists that are girl-friendly or girl-powered?
- Is the elevation of female protagonists as prominent figures of strength and power in children's literature and movies an unambiguously positive move toward gender equity, or does it also contribute to a decline in positive role models for boys whose relative achievement levels have been sinking?
- Should Black boys more often be taught by Black males who can be role models for them, rather than by white female teachers, no matter how empathetic those teachers might be?
- How can Nordic countries, with outstanding records of gender equity, be fully inclusive of newly immigrant cultures that do not make gender equity a priority, and may even be opposed to it?

What should we do about aspects of multiple identity that are conflicting and contradictory? What about marginalized religious groups that oppress gender-based minorities? Or impoverished white working-class communities that also contain strains of racism and xenophobia? What about people with identities that are culturally marginalized or oppressed, but who also possess immense wealth privilege?

Meghan Markle, wife of the United Kingdom's Prince Harry, and Rishi Sunak, the country's prime minister, are both people of color. They have been subject to egregious racial abuse from members of the British establishment. Yet, as people who married into two of the wealthiest families in the world, can their experiences of oppression be equated with or elevated above those of a poor Black hospital cleaner or a white homeless person, for example?

What do we do when people are oppressed or marginalized in some respects, but are oppressors or privileged in others? Do we try to weigh the scales and say that sometimes the good counterbalances the evil? Do we insist that any evil, however unintended or culturally widespread at the time, cancels out all the other good that a person may have done?

Or do we avoid identity controversies altogether, hoping that they will all go away, and that we will just be able to get back to familiar territory, like "the basics"?

Sometimes, there just isn't one incontrovertible answer. For instance, we should certainly dismantle or critically recast the colonial statues of owners and traders of enslaved people. But do racist slurs against Native Americans by John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, which were common in his time, invalidate his foundational contribution to the environmental movement? Should former U.S. president Bill Clinton, feminist author Naomi Wolf, singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson, gay U.S. presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, and former Ontario socialist premier Bob Rae all rescind and repay their prestigious Rhodes Scholarship awards now that Cecil Rhodes, for whom they were named and by whose will they were founded, has been exposed as the architect of South African apartheid?

There are no easy answers to such probing questions. We must be able to reason our way through them in a respectful and empathetic way. There should be room for dissident perspectives to be aired, even (and especially) when we emphatically disagree with them.

Identity has become too much of a tinderbox of politicized emotion.

Identity issues are a tangled web. The rest of this book weaves its way through this knotted social fabric of identity. In the closing chapter, it concludes with ideas, strategies, and protocols about how to do that together.

Identity has become too much of a tinderbox of politicized emotion. We've all experienced how an anachronistic term or a misplaced pronoun can ignite a firestorm of anger. It is too easy to assume the role of Grand Inquisitor who takes it upon themselves to go about denouncing the supposedly less enlightened. It's time to get beyond all of that. It's time to push hard to determine what most of us can agree on together, and to establish ways of living with and engaging in dialogue together about those aspects of identity on which we initially differ. The place to begin is with our kids, in our schools.

Collective Identity

What is *essential for some* children is *good for all* of them.

The schools that we studied were built on the belief that what is *essential for some* children is *good for all* of them. For example, technological enhancements of learning for students with disabilities are beneficial for other learners, too. Gender-neutral toilets can be designed in ways that mean better bathrooms for all students. Indigenous ways of knowing that connect learning to the outdoors, and that forge spiritual connections to something greater than our individual senses of self, can be inspiring and engaging for young people from all cultures and

communities. In the hands of talented educators and supportive communities, the identities of a particular group can contribute ideas and practices that benefit everyone.

This is one way to approach an important theme of our book: moving toward some sense of *collective identity*. What things can we empathize with and agree on even though we may differ on other issues? Are there some things greater than all of us we can commit to without these being imperial, Western, or predominantly male, for instance?

The bulwarks of society that people relied upon for generations to give their lives structure and value, like conventional religion, traditional families, and stable political states, have been eroded and sometimes completely lost. Commonality is not so obviously achievable anymore.

Collective identities needn't mean *common* or *imposed* identities. The point is not to make identities identical. But they must amount to more than mere collections or aggregates. There must be boundaries and borders, somewhere. And we must discuss and debate these without prejudging the outcomes. What are sustainable immigration strategies that will enable a host country to grow and change by engaging with new identities without the country losing all its existing historic and cultural identity? Conversely, what immigration rates and levels will provide enough new taxpayers to sustain an aging host population? What does neuroscience tell us about the appropriate age of human brain development and maturity that should inform when young people are allowed and entitled to make medically irreversible decisions about their gender identity? What racial or homophobic comments must be treated as unacceptable even if they are made by someone who is economically oppressed, has mental health problems, or feels protected by their privilege or their religion?

Collective identities needn't mean *common* or *imposed* identities. The point is not to make identities identical. But they must amount to more than mere collections or aggregates.

What will become of us? How can we decide? Can we create a sense of belonging and inclusion in which all students can truly flourish? In practical terms, what must be done so that all students feel welcomed as whole people in our schools?

What about working-class students who see little or no discussion of labor history, craft pride, or collective class solidarity in their schools? We must learn to work with people who are different from us as well as those who are the same. Our world should not just be about "me and my group," but about all our groups together—except for the most heinous.

Consider an example. We spent seven years working with educators in five states in the Pacific Northwest of the United States to increase student engagement in rural schools. Many of the educators there, like a lot of other U.S. educators, were (unlike us) supporters of the presidential candidate at the time, Donald Trump. One of them was a

Teacher of the Year finalist for his state. He was awesome at engaging his students—the purpose of our project. He was also a strong pro-life advocate—a position that neither of us hold. Yet he and his wife had fostered a great many children and teenagers with severe physical and mental disabilities as acts of immense care and sacrifice. In our work with him and his many colleagues, we concentrated on what we held in common that would benefit the children they taught, not on other things that divided us.

This is the *Age of Identity* we address in this book. It is rooted in our work with Ontario's educators while drawing on our other firsthand research. It also builds on classic and contemporary literature on identity and identity politics to forge a new way forward in our classrooms, among our colleagues, and with our communities that can create educational experiences that are inclusive of all but the most hateful identities. Identity should be a key to inclusion, not a lock that shuts people out. With greater inclusion, we will often get greater equity and increased belonging. Given where our troubled world is right now, there are few better things we could commit to than that.

The Flow of the Book

Identity should be a key to inclusion, not a lock that shuts people out.

The book is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 2 looks at self and identity development. It examines classic theories of how selves develop across the life span, through a complex interaction between individual development and socialization, from childhood into adolescence, and through many phases of adulthood.

Chapter 3 points to how our identities are not only inside us, like objects or things, but also emerge through our everyday interactions with other people, especially in relation to family, friends, and teachers who are significant for us.

Chapter 4 discusses how to celebrate and include identities, and how to grant them greater recognition and bring them to the fore in how we think about young people's development.

Chapter 5 looks at how and in what ways identities are multiple and not singular. It examines what happens when people have combinations of different identities in terms of nationality, social class, and race.

Chapter 6 engages with and further develops one of the most topical and controversial ways of thinking about multiple identities: the concept of *intersectional* forms of marginalization. This captures how many people experience multiple, compounded, and sometimes contradictory relationships to oppression in their lives and their education.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, asks what leaders of all kinds can do to work through and with the *Age of Identity* to create the best possible inclusive and equitable schools and school systems where all students of every class, color, creed, and other forms of identity can flourish and be successful.

BE A BUFFALO

A storm has come upon us. It's been brewing for some time. Culture wars. Identity politics. Parents who are against kids being exposed to controversial and inappropriate material. Teachers and administrators who feel constantly under attack. Parents' rights. Teachers' plights. There is hostility, anxiety, panic, and fear. Should you shelter from the storm? Should you try to outrun it? The storm's not going away, though. What should you do?

Out on the plains, where the buffalo roam, animals can sense when storm clouds are gathering. Some hide. Others flee. They try to keep ahead of the howling wind and the lashing rain. But the storm catches up with them. Soon, they find they are running with the storm and in it. The storm is all around them, all the time. They are trapped. It's exhausting.

The buffalo sense the storm is coming too. But they adopt a different strategy from the other animals. They turn around to face the storm. It seems a reckless thing to do. Yet it makes complete sense. Turning into the storm is unpleasant, dangerous even. The threat and the fear abate quickly, though. By heading into the storm, the buffalo are also moving through it. Soon, they are out on the other side. The storm is behind them. The danger has passed.[42]

How will you deal with the identity storms that have come upon our schools, threatened our communities, and consumed our politics? Will you try to avoid the storms? Will you run and hide? Or will you be a buffalo and face the storms head-on, knowing that, on the other side, things can be better for everyone?

When we are confronting the threats of climate change, pandemics, racism, violence, xenophobia, and war, there is so much to fight for in education without fighting unnecessarily against each other and among ourselves. How can we learn to be? How can we learn to live together? These are the questions.

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